

Parental Choices in Childcare Services: Customer Experience and Risks of Unregistered Childcare

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Abstract: Parental decision-making in selecting childcare services is crucial to ensuring children's safety and well-being. However, many parents face difficulty accessing reliable information, often relying on unverified sources such as social media and personal recommendations. This study explores parental experiences in choosing childcare, focusing on challenges, risks, and consequences. A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with parents whose children experienced neglect or abuse at childcare centres. Thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software, revealed three key findings. First, many parents rely heavily on informal sources like Facebook, which often lack credible reviews or verification. This reliance increases the risk of selecting unsafe childcare. Second, affordability and proximity significantly influence decisions. Financial pressures and work commitments often compel parents to choose unregistered providers despite known safety concerns. Convenience and cost were prioritised over regulatory status in many cases. Third, children exposed to unsafe childcare environments exhibited concerning physical and behavioural changes, including fear, withdrawal, speech delays, bruises, and recurring illness. Some suffered lasting trauma, negatively affecting emotional and social development. Parents often hesitated to report abuse, especially when dealing with unregistered centres, due to legal ambiguity and lack of evidence. This study highlights the urgent need for a centralised digital platform offering verified reviews, ratings, and registration status to aid parents in making informed decisions. Enhancing transparency can significantly reduce risks associated with unregulated childcare. Future research should examine the role of government oversight and parental awareness in strengthening childcare selection practices.

Keywords: *Parental Decision-making, Childcare Services, Customer Experience, Unregistered Childcare, Safety Risks*

1. Introduction

Childcare services play a vital role in supporting working parents and ensuring children's early development and well-being. The choice of childcare service is a significant decision for parents as it directly impacts the safety, health, and development of their children. Lingering in Malaysia, even with regulation from the government that has been enforced by the Childcare Centres Act 1984, there continue to be numerous childcare centres in operation without formal registration. For instance, by May 31, 2024, there were a total of 506 unregistered childcare centres identified by the Social Welfare Department (Astro Awani, 2024). In Penang, 358 unregistered kindergartens, nurseries, and childcare centres have also been reported to the authorities (Astro Awani, 2023).

From the perspective of parents as customers, safety, cost, location and access to reliable information influence the choice of the childcare centre. Many parents have little more than informal sources of information, such as social media, online forums, word of mouth recommendations and so on, when deciding which childcare service to use. Although commonly employed, this approach does not have a robust way of being verified. Some parents are opting to go with unregistered providers despite knowing the risks involved due to economic pressures and insufficient registered childcare centres.

One of the main issues is that there is no proper monitoring system for unregistered childcare centres, which has resulted in increased incidences of child neglect and child abuse. Statistics indicate that there were a total of 4,424 child abuse and neglect cases reported until a year ago (August 2024), with incidents that involved unregistered childcare centres being the highest (Sinar Harian, 2024). There were also 23 cases of infant abuse in childcare centres reported up to September 2024 (Kosmo, 2024). Parents with safety complaints about unregistered childcare centres find it hard to take legal action because there is little evidence and unclear regulations.

This study aims to assess parents' experiences in selecting childcare services, explore the major factors contributing to parents' choice of childcare centres, assess the effects of using unregistered childcare centres on children's wellbeing and suggest approaches to enhancing transparency and safety when selecting childcare centres. The findings of this study will be used to support improvements to policy on monitoring childcare centres and will assist parents in making informed and safe choices for their children. Moreover, this study opens a discussion on the potential to establish a centralised online registry for childcare providers to be rated on their regulatory status and an access point for parents to find validated customer reviews and safety ratings.

2. Literature Review

Parents' Perspective as Customers in Selecting a Childcare Centre

As customers, parents assess childcare services based on safety, cleanliness, availability and reputation of the childcare centre (Forry, Isner, Daneri, & Tout, 2014). Nevertheless, studies suggest that they usually decide based on their own experiences and advice from relatives and friends, as well as social media reviews, without checking the registration or registration of the caregiver (Mansor, Eng, & Rasul, 2022). This presents a gap in the official information available that would allow parents to make decisions with greater clarity.

Parents' Satisfaction and Expectations in Choosing a Childcare Centre

Factors influencing decisions about childcare services help determine parents' satisfaction with the service. Safety, friendliness of caregivers, cleanliness, and communication with management are the most important aspects that parents value (Pilarz, Sandstrom, & Henly, 2022). Conversely, studies have shown that some parents choose unregistered childcare centres that offer lower fees with flexible operating hours despite high safety risks (Jamaludin, Azman, & Roslan, 2018). This speaks volumes about the lack of quality and affordable registered childcare facilities.

Risks and Implications of Parental Decisions

Previous studies have had similar findings about the risks of unregistered childcare centres. Prabhakaran (2020) stated that unregulated childcare centres have greater potential for child safety issues, including neglect and abuse. Similarly, the absence of monitoring mechanisms and formal channels for complaints also creates difficulties for parents to seek redress in the event of an incident (Mansor et al., 2022). Existing research indicates a need for further examination of how parents evaluate and mitigate such risks in childcare decision-making.

Centralized Information and Monitoring System Requirements

Many countries have adopted digital solutions that allow parents to access greater information transparency about childcare centres, including whether they are registered and have any safety ratings. However, Mansor et al. (2022) revealed that Malaysian parents yet experience difficulties in finding reliable information about childcare centres. Hence, this gap in the information delivery system creates a need for providing a digital platform to parents to get verified customer reviews, regulatory reports and compliance information of the childcare centres. This system also increases transparency in the childcare industry and helps parents make more data-based and more confident decisions in the best interest of their children and their safety.

Summary

Choosing a childcare centre is an important decision for parents because it directly affects the safety and well-being of their children. However, many gaps need to be addressed, especially in understanding the factors, challenges, and impacts of parents' decision-making in choosing a childcare centre. Therefore, this study was conducted to understand the main factors that influence parents' choice of childcare centres, the challenges they face in making decisions, and the impact of their choices on the safety and well-being of children. This study also benefits policymakers and childcare providers. A deeper understanding of parents' challenges can help authorities formulate more effective policies for improving the monitoring of childcare centres while improving their services to meet customer needs. Furthermore, this study also emphasizes the need to develop a more transparent and structured childcare information system to ensure that parents can make more accurate, safe decisions based on valid and verified data to ensure the safety and well-being of children in using childcare centre services.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This research used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore the experiences of parents in choosing childcare services, particularly those whose children had been neglected or abused in an unregistered childcare centre. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allowed for a deeper understanding of the participants' subjective experiences, allowing the researcher to identify shared patterns and themes. Compared to case studies or ethnography, phenomenology provides a more holistic perspective on parents' experiences, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and factors that influence parents' decisions and the consequences of those decisions. This scientific approach ensures the authenticity of the experiences collected by the participants to comply with scientific standards.

Study Subject

Using purposive sampling, six parents from various employment backgrounds around Peninsular Malaysia were selected and prepared to be interviewed from 3 November 2024 to 4 January 2025. Inclusion criteria included (1) parents who worked and were dependent on childcare centres, (2) children aged between 1 and 4 years at the time of the incident, (3) involved in at least one incident involving neglect, abuse, or negligence at childcare centres, (4) using unregistered childcare centres (home-based childcare, care by neighbours or relatives, etc.) and (5) parents who were willing and able to share their experiences in detail. The number of respondents required was determined by interviewing parents who met the inclusion criteria until data saturation and no new themes were generated. According to Wan Ruslan, Samat, and Yusof (2014), participants must have criteria set by the researcher and the number of participants for a qualitative study is sufficient at least 2 to 10 people until the data obtained is saturated.

Interview Protocol

The interview guide was developed based on a literature review and consultation with experts. A semi-structured interview format was chosen to ensure flexibility in obtaining in-depth data while maintaining consistency in the topics studied. This method is more suitable than structured interviews, which can limit participants' responses or unstructured interviews that may produce inconsistent data. Key questions asked included (1) Can you share your personal experience of using the services of a child care centre before?, (2) How did you find out about this child care service?, (3) What are the main factors you considered in choosing the care centre?, (4) What experiences or signs led you to suspect neglect or abuse?, (5) How has your child's behaviour or health changed after attending the care centre?, and (6) What challenges did you face after discovering this issue and how did you overcome them?. Supplementary questions were also used to obtain more detailed information based on the participants' individual experiences.

Data Collection

One-to-one interviews were conducted in a quiet and private environment via face-to-face meetings, online video calls, or telephone calls. The flexibility in the interview method was intended to ensure participant comfort and maintain the depth of data obtained. Each session lasted 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participant's permission. Field notes were also taken to document important observations, including participants' emotional expressions and responses. Participants were also assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any implications. The researcher also ensured neutrality throughout the interviews by using techniques such as active listening and explanation to avoid bias in data collection.

Data Analysis

Interview transcriptions were made verbatim within 24 hours of each session. Data were analysed using thematic analysis using NVivo software to ensure that key patterns could be systematically identified. Thematic analysis was chosen because it provides flexibility in identifying meaning from the data, compared to other approaches such as grounded theory, which are more focused on the formation of new theories. The analysis process followed six steps by Braun and Clarke:

Data identification: iteratively reading and reviewing the transcripts to identify initial ideas.

Initial code generation: identifying meaningful segments of the data and systematically coding them using

NVivo.

Developing themes: collating codes into potential themes.

Theme revision: review and refining the identified themes with the full data set

Naming and defining themes: giving each theme a clear name and developing its overall description.

Reporting: the process of transforming findings into an understandable narrative.

The data were coded independently by two researchers to ensure consistency, with any disagreement being resolved in discussion with a third researcher. This step aids in making the data analysis more reliable and accurate.

Ethical Review

This study was reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (2024-0279-01). All participants provided written informed consent before participating in the study. This study followed the research ethical principles, including the confidentiality of data, no compulsion to participate, and a voluntary decision to join the study with the right to leave at any time. As a researcher, it is important to uphold the principles of academic integrity, which include refraining from any form of misconduct, including plagiarism, data fabrication, or false information. These steps ensure that this study is performed with complete ethics and transparency.

4. Findings and Results

In this study, six parents were selected as interview participants. These participants came from a variety of employment backgrounds and had experience with sending and using childcare services, particularly unregistered childcare centres associated with cases of abuse or neglect. All participants in this study were parents of children aged between one and four years old at the time of the incident at the unregistered childcare centre. In addition, participants had been involved in at least one case of abuse or neglect that had a negative impact on their child's well-being. Table 1 outlines in more detail the criteria for participants in this study. This study explores parents' experiences in making decisions about childcare in Malaysia. A phenomenological method was used, focusing on parents who had directly experienced situations where their children were victims of abuse or neglect at unregistered childcare centres. The findings of this study were analysed thematically using NVivo software and divided into three main themes. Sample quotes for each theme are presented in Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4.

Table 1: Participant criteria

Criteria	Description
Employment Status	Parent(s) who are working and dependent on the childcare centre.
Child Age Group	The child was between 1 and 4 years of age at the time of the incident.
Type of Incident	At least one incident involving neglect, abuse, or negligence at the childcare centre.
Type of childcare used	Unregistered childcare centre (home caregiver, care by neighbours or relatives, etc)
Willingness to Participate	Parents who are willing and able to share their experiences in detail

Theme 1: Sources of Information in Selecting a Childcare Centre

The decision to choose a childcare centre is a big challenge for parents, especially when they do not have access to authentic and reliable information. In this study, it was found that parents tend to rely on three main sources in obtaining information about childcare centres, namely social media, personal social networks, and informal advertisements.

Social media, especially platforms like Facebook and Instagram, are a major source for parents when searching for childcare. Parents join Facebook groups related to childcare services to get recommendations, find, or advertise for caregivers. They also rely on reviews and testimonials shared in these groups. Unfortunately, the insights acquired from these channels rarely have a proper assessment process while being very bias-prone. This trend has been reflected by the fact that some of the parents in our study said that they found caregivers

through Facebook and selected them according to comments posted in social media groups. While this method is easy and fast, it puts parents at risk of choosing a caregiver who is unregistered or unqualified.

Parents also receive information from neighbours, friends or family, in addition to social media. Since these social networks are based on direct experiences of people they know, this makes it a more reputable source of referrals. Participants in this study noted that they will first reach out to neighbours inquiring about services through their friends' children before even considering a search on Facebook for a childcare centre. This demonstrates that parents trust information that they received from a person whom they know personally more than the information received from an unknown online source. Even though referrals from these social networks still cannot guarantee that a certain childcare centre is safe or meets the established standard. Decisions are made based on the experiences of certain individuals without a formal assessment of the level of safety and child welfare at the centre.

In addition, some parents also obtained information through informal advertisements placed in public places such as apartment elevators, housing area bulletin boards, or exposed leaflets. These advertisements usually contained the phone number of the caregiver or childcare centre and offered services directly to parents in need. In this study, participants stated that they found an advertisement for a childcare centre in their apartment elevator and then contacted the caregiver based on the number listed. Although this method made it easier for parents to quickly obtain services, it also posed a high risk because there was no additional information about the background, experience, or qualifications of the advertised caregiver. Table 2 below shows a summary of the sub-themes and interview excerpts that supported this theme.

Table 2: Summary of sub-themes and excerpts from interviews for theme 1

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotations
Sources of Information in Selecting a Childcare Centre	Social media	"I'm looking for a caregiver through Facebook." "So, from Facebook, when we search, we'll look for a caregiver. Caregiver around, like us in Shah Alam." "Ha, join the Facebook group. Because when we see it, they write there, what age can they look after, until what time." "My husband, my husband posted an ad on Facebook." "Teacher just reviewed from their Instagram."
	Social networks	"Before I found Facebook, I took a neighbour. A neighbour, a neighbour in a block of houses." "I took a neighbour who used to babysit my friend's child." "We asked the neighbours. They sent it there." "I asked the member. The member said he sent it there so far okay, when he sent it early, okay. So, we decided to send it"
	Informal advertising	"I saw the caregiver's phone number on the apartment elevator" "Same apartment. There's her number on the elevator, what's up? Level this, this, this. Want to send your child here, here"

Theme 2: Factors to Consider in Selecting a Childcare Centre

Apart from the source of information obtained, parents also consider several other factors when making their decision to select a childcare centre. In this study, the three main factors that influenced parents' decision-making were location, cost, and flexibility of operating hours.

The location of a childcare centre plays an important role in parents' decision-making. Most parents in this study were more likely to choose a childcare centre that was close to their home or workplace. This preference was given to make it easier to drop off and pick up their children, especially for parents with busy schedules. This was supported by several participants who stated that they chose the childcare centre because it was close to their home or workplace, allowing them to easily drop off their children before work and pick them up quickly after work. This factor indicates that convenience and logistical convenience are priorities for parents when making decisions. However, this location preference can sometimes cause parents to neglect the safety

and/or quality of childcare services. They are more concerned with convenience than whether the childcare is registered or run by trained professionals.

Cost is the other common thing that influences the decision-maker for parents and parents try to choose a childcare centre. This study showed that parents are likely to select childcare centres which provide flexible and economical fee structures. Fees at childcare centres that do not require charges remain open to families with moderate or low income because they enable payment based on the financial capacity of the family. One participant stated that the childcare centres they chose were not tied to a fixed fee but charged fees according to the parents' ability and willingness. In addition, parents were also more likely to choose unregistered childcare that offered cheaper prices compared to registered and regulated childcare centres. However, such a decision carries risks as cheaper childcare centres may not have the equipment, facilities, or trained carers, thus increasing the risk to the safety and well-being of children.

In addition to location and cost, flexibility of operating hours is also an important factor in choosing a childcare centre. Most parents in this study emphasized that they chose a childcare centre that could adjust its operating hours to their work schedule. As evidenced by one participant stating that she considered the time factor because she had to go to work as early as 7:30 am. Therefore, childcare centres that accept children earlier in the morning were the top choice. The ability of the childcare centre to adjust the hours of care to the parents' schedule played a large role in their decision, especially for parents who work in sectors with irregular work schedules. However, childcare centres that offer flexible hours are often unregistered childcare centres that operate independently. This is because registered childcare centres usually have more regular operating hours and follow certain regulations. Table 3. Below is a summary of the sub-themes and interview excerpts that support theme 2.

Table 3: Summary of sub-themes and excerpts from interviews for theme 2

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotations
Factors to Consider in Selecting a Childcare Centre	Location	"That time because it's close. After that, the most important thing for teachers is that it's close to home. Close to home." "The only reason is that it's close to my house, right?" "That's why we think it's close to my house, brother, in the morning it's easy to drop it off close by. Then it's close to pick it up from work because it's a park." "That area is close to my work area. It's not even five minutes away"
	Cost	"Then the second one, he didn't set a fee. He seemed to ask how much we could afford to pay like that" "Our cost with the caregiver" "It's not far off, we think, it's a lot of cost, right?"
	Time flexibility	"Ha, time and cost. Time.." "Ha, it suits my time" "The first factor is the teacher's time, right? Time." "I also consider time because I will be going to work at seven thirty"

Theme 3: The Effect of Using an Unregistered Childcare Centre

The findings show that parents turning to unregistered childcare services is a worrying trend and has a negative impact on children's health and well-being. With a failure to monitor and regulate childcare facilities, children in unregistered care are at higher risk of health issues, physical injury, emotional harm, and even death.

Registered childcare follows certain health and safety regulations not only to protect the child physically, but also mentally. In addition, it can also potentially lead to long-term health issues and a slow decline in quality of life if the complications and effects are not addressed. In this study, several parents said that their child experienced health problems such as vomiting, diarrhoea, and prolonged fever after being sent to an unregulated childcare centre. For example, another mother claimed that her child vomited wind and vomited

water as soon as he was brought home from the childcare centre. This suggests that the child was not being fed enough or that the child was experiencing physical stress. One mother also stated that her child had a fever that lasted for two weeks and did not improve despite seeking medical help. It is possible that the health care offered in the unregistered childcare centre may not meet the standards of health care and children are more likely to become ill or susceptible to diseases.

Health issues are not the only complaints. According to parents, physical injuries are another common problem among children that sent to unregistered childcare centres. If children are not closely supervised, they are more likely to suffer injuries that affect their long-term health and development. This is supported by statements from parents describing bruises on their children's faces, cuts on their limbs, and (in more severe cases) brain haemorrhages. For example, one mother found bruises on her child's cheek and did not get an explanation from the caregiver, while another mother found bruises on her child's legs and did not know the cause of the injury. This is evidence that there is negligence or violence in these unregistered childcare centres that will affect the safety of the child.

Not only do the physical consequences lead to detrimental effects, but negative experiences in unregulated childcare centres also harm the emotional and psychological well-being of children. Other parents said their children had displayed symptoms of trauma after being placed at the centre, including intense fear and changes in behaviour. As illustrated by one mother, her child became silent and does not speak after the negative experience at the childcare centre. As a result, her child still has lingering fears of people surrounding her, which shows the extent to which the experience at the childcare centre has taken its toll on the child's emotional well-being.

In some of the most tragic cases included in this study, parents also described losing their children due to negligence in unregistered childcare centres. Without strict safety procedures and trained caregivers, children are at risk of life-threatening incidents. As evidenced by one mother's experience of losing her child due to choking on milk in an unregistered childcare centre. She stated that when informed of her child's condition, the child showed no response despite being given emergency treatment. In another case, a mother reported that doctors had to remove her child's ventilator after 13 days because the injuries sustained in the unregistered childcare centre could not be saved. Incidents like this demonstrate the serious risks faced by children when placed in childcare centres that do not have adequate safety systems and health services. Table 4. Below is a summary of the sub-themes and interview excerpts supporting theme 3.

Table 4: Summary of sub-themes and excerpts from interviews for theme 3

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotations
The Effect of Using an Unregistered Childcare Centre	Physical health	"I want to take my child back, the child is throwing up wind, vomiting water as if he hasn't eaten for a day." "The fever hasn't gone down for two weeks" "The fever lasted for three days, I took him to the clinic twice, then he seemed to have diarrhoea.. He had a fever and wasn't feeling well." "After a few weeks, he was vomiting badly. Vomiting, pooping."
	Physical injury	"After that, I noticed bruises on my cheeks, cuts and bruises" "When I was about to pick him up, he just said that the bruises on his face were from a fall" "I can see that he has all those wounds. The inside, the first skin is torn" "After that, I was also shocked when I went home to pick up my son, he looked like he was blue, right?" "He fell. The hospital confirmed that there was a brain haemorrhage" "After that, when I sent him away, suddenly in the morning he sent him away fine, when I came back I saw that my son's eyes were bruised"

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"The tip of my son's toe was injured. He looked like he was injured. I don't know what it was."
"My son is scared and doesn't want to talk"
"He's traumatized by people to this day"
"Suddenly his face turned blue. maybe he choked on milk. So, it's been half an hour since I did CPR. There's really no heartbeat."
"He said my son was covered in a blanket. His face was all blue... The doctor said my son was gone."
"On the thirteenth day, the doctor took everything he had, including oxygen, because he couldn't be saved"
"He died at the caregiver's house less than 2 weeks later."

Discussion

This study explores parents' experiences of using childcare centres, particularly unregistered ones, from a consumer perspective. The findings of this study can be summarized according to three main themes which relate to: (1) sources of information in selecting childcare centres, (2) factors considered by parents in choosing a childcare centre, and (3) the effect of using unregistered childcare centres on children's well-being.

In the early stages of selection, parents often face uncertainty and anxiety in looking for a suitable childcare centre during the selection process. The reliance on social media such as Facebook and Instagram as the only source of information shows that parents have information without a valid evaluation mechanism. A study by Mat Seri, Mamat, Omar, and Kamaruddin (2020) shows that parents often make decisions based on their perceptions of childcare centre quality without verifying the qualifications or registration status of the centre. This means that an unregistered and not safe childcare centre can be utilized.

Parents' decisions are mainly driven by location, cost and operational hours flexibility. Parents engaged in work want childcare centres that are convenient in terms of location, as stated in a study done by Bernama (2021) shows that accessibility is a key factor in childcare centre selection. Furthermore, cost is one of the main factors, where most of the parents choose cheaper childcare centres even though they are not registered, which is in accordance with Hisamudin's (2020) findings that parents tend to choose childcare centres based on their financial capacities. Operating hours flexibility is also a key consideration, particularly for parents in other fields requiring irregular working hours. Yet many unregistered childcare centres, or 'flexi-care centres' are available, and are unsupervised by any authorities, endangering the safety of children.

The choice of an unregistered childcare centre has a detrimental effect on children's well-being. Infants and toddlers forced into unlicensed care are at greater risk of encountering health issues including persistent fever and being violently sick, as well as physical injuries like unexplained bruises and open wounds. Astro Awani (2021) found that unregistered childcare centres predisposed children to neglect and abuse. Aside from the physical impact, children are displaying trauma, including severe fear and changes in behaviour. This aligns with the results of Bernama (2021), stating that children who had a negative experience related to childcare would potentially face long-term emotional and social development disorders.

Strengths

Unlike most retrospective studies, this study involved direct interaction with parents who had just experienced difficulties in choosing a childcare centre. The phenomenological approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the parents' real experiences, producing richer and more authentic data. The use of NVivo software also increased the accuracy of the thematic analysis, ensuring that the patterns identified were based on strong evidence.

Limitations

Due to the criteria of qualitative research, the sample size of this study was limited. Firstly, the limited sample size may affect the applicability of the findings to a larger population. Second, the study focused only on the perspective of parents without involving other parties such as service providers and authorities, which could provide a more comprehensive picture. Third, the study was retrospective, which may be affected by

participant recall bias. Finally, the scope of the study, which was limited to the context of Peninsular Malaysia, limits the generalizability of the findings to the population in that region only, without considering the variations that may exist in Sabah and Sarawak.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provides a deeper understanding of the challenges parents face in choosing childcare. Factors such as unreliable sources of information, lower costs, and flexible operating hours lead many parents to choose unregistered childcare despite being aware of the risks. The study also shows the negative impacts on children's well-being resulting from such decisions, including health problems, physical injuries, and emotional trauma. Therefore, there is an urgent need for stricter monitoring systems, increased parental awareness, and the development of digital platforms to ensure parents have access to reliable information before making decisions regarding their child's care. One practical recommendation is the establishment of a centralized digital system that provides up-to-date and verified information on the registration status and safety ratings of childcare centres. Models such as the Ofsted Early Years Register in the UK and the National Quality Framework in Australia have proven effective in improving accountability in the childcare sector (Tang, Hallam, & Sawyer-Morris, 2020), and a similar system in Malaysia could empower parents to make better-informed choices while discouraging the use of unregistered services. Additionally, the government should consider offering financial incentives or subsidies to support childcare centres in meeting regulatory requirements. This could encourage more operators to register formally, thereby expanding the availability of safe, affordable, and legally compliant childcare options. Future studies could examine the long-term impact on children sent to unregistered childcare and the effectiveness of government interventions in improving the system for selecting safer childcare.

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