

A SILENT EPIDEMIC

Hidden ear infections study reveals one in four children suffer



EXCLUSIVE RHIANNA MITCHELL

One in four children in Perth daycare centres has been found to have untreated ear infections.

The startling finding was uncovered in a screening program involving more than 700 children and prompted fears more in WA could be suffering from learning delays as a result of undiagnosed ear issues.

Goodstart Early Learning centres partnered with Earbus and Connecting Community for Kids to conduct the screening project which led to 27 per cent of children being referred to a GP with suspected otitis media, or glue ear, from September to

December last year. Between January and June this year, 23 per cent were suspected of having otitis media. An earlier pilot study put the infection rate at about 70 per cent of children tested.

Goodstart State manager Todd Dawson said the results were surprising and concerning. "Otitis media is 100 per cent preventable and if undiagnosed or untreated, it has a significant impact on a child's ability to learn, grow and develop," he said. "Given the importance of brain development in the early years, this can have long lasting impacts for children later in life."

But Mr Dawson said significant barriers remained when it came to accessing treatment, due to long wait lists for ear,

nose and throat surgery — including grommet surgery to treat otitis media. "It is one thing to do the screening to determine the need for further medical intervention, it is another issue altogether to get the intervention," he said.

Ear screener Regina van Heythuysen said children who had received intervention as a result of the screening were happier, sleeping better and interacting more.

"There is such a gap between the newborn hearing screening and when children start kindy, and there is so much early development they could miss out on."

But she said some parents were struggling to get referrals from doctors, including one mother who was told three

times her child was fine. He has since been booked in for surgery after the family sought a second opinion.

Clare Shellam is the centre manager at Goodstart in Warnbro and was shocked when both of her children, pictured above, who attend the centre, were found to have issues. "I've been in childcare for 16 years and saw no red flags," she said. Son Jasper, 21 months, was diagnosed with glue ear and has since had grommet surgery, while four-year-old Aurora had a tonsillectomy and adenoidectomy.

"Jasper came out of his shell with his speech after having surgery, he's a little chatter box, he can put two or three words together and understand instruction," she said.