

I have a nearly two year old daughter who attends Long Day Care 3 days a week. As a relatively new parent who had no exposure and very little knowledge of processes and formalities with childcare, I would like to share my experience.

1. Accessing Childcare

I started doing some research on childcare in the Sutherland Shire a couple of months before my daughter was born. The council website was helpful and had some open sessions are some long day care centres and for family day care. I also spoke to a few people I know in the area about which centres they would recommend and their experience with the system. I was advised to get my child registered on the council and other privately owned centres asap as there were waiting lists everywhere at all good centres.

After inspecting and deciding on some centres I selected a few to register with. The forms were relatively simple to complete. One centre at Sutherland Hospital charged me a waitlist fee, I have not ever heard anything from them. All centres I registered for said that I was unlikely to get a placement for 12 months. This was very disheartening as I was planning to start looking for employment after nearly a year, but not knowing whether I could get any childcare meant I delayed this. I was offered a 2 day a week position for my daughter in October 2012 to commence in February 2013.

I was on the council childcare centre waitlist and did not hear anything for over a year, and when I did it was a call to ask if I still wanted to be on the waitlist. There was never any indication as to the likelihood of a placement or when. I understand that each applicant is considered individually, but as someone wanting to return to the workforce not receiving any communication on how my application was being progressed was very disappointing.

My suggestion would be regarding placements and waitlists would be that parents should be given an indication as to the likelihood of when they may receive notification of placement opportunities. Surely most centres have an idea of how often and when placements are likely to come up based on past experiences. This would make planning a return to the workforce for mothers (or fathers) easier, plus for budgeting for the family.

2. Use of ECEC

I decided that I wanted my daughter to attend day care for a number of reasons. I think it is unfair to ask grandparents to mind my child everyday whilst I attend work. One or two days a week would be fine. I also wanted my daughter to have interaction with other children and adults at a young age to aid her social skills. Day care centres also offer development opportunities that I, as a mother, may not be able to fulfil or be aware of. I'm not an educator nor do I know what children can start to do at what age, therefore I feel a day care centre would offer my child a variety of learning opportunities.

3. Quality of ECEC

I undertook research on the mychild website, council website and with friends on what a day care centre should offer, the child/carer ratios and approximate costs. I wanted a quality centre that was within a 5-10km radius of home. My research of centres and my visitation to open sessions allowed me to get an understanding of how the centres work and what I was comfortable sending my daughter to.

I understand many people have to use day care due to their family situations and that price and location may be more important than quality. However I am willing to pay for quality and would happily pay more if I knew that the carers of my child were all suitably qualified and that my daughter was getting the best and most personalised care available.

I have read reports last year of the pay increases for child care workers and believe they deserve them. This is because they have such a large responsibility for the safety and well-being of our most precious children and also because they are required to educate and develop them, plus follow-up with a lot of paperwork. They know my child intimately and assess her development progress along with me. I would prefer quality care and development over fancy looking premises. I want to know that the people looking after my child are the best available and do truly care for her.

4. Problems with ECEC

I unfortunately was made redundant from my job when I was 5 ½ months pregnant, so getting a new one before my daughter was born was impossible. This meant that I needed to find new employment. My husband works interstate in the mines (FIFO), therefore I could not start a job until I knew I had childcare. I also had to find a job that would allow me to pick-up and drop-off my daughter within the hours of the centre she received placement to, plus on the days that she would be attending. I have worked in Executive management positions for over 5 years, so finding a job that would offer this flexibility in the same level position was impossible. I spoke to a number of recruitment agencies and people within my network, however flexible roles at this level were virtually non-existent.

My main problem was that if I was to go back to a full-time, Executive management role I would be working 10-12 hour days and likely to have to travel to the city. This would mean that my daughter would be in childcare from 7am to 6pm (centre hours) 3 days a week and I would have to rely on my parents-in-law to mind her 2 days a week and pick her up from day care most days as I would be unlikely to get there by 6pm. If my husband was not working away in the mines our situation would obviously have been different. I was not willing to have such little time with my daughter throughout the week and did not want to be so dependent on my newly retired in-laws.

I therefore made the decision to start my own business and work from home on the days that suited me. I was fortunate to have an opportunity to work for a company I knew through previous employment that are based in the UK. As they do not have an office in Australia this situation suited them. The work is not at the executive level I previously worked at, but suits my current lifestyle. It means my daughter is not at childcare for 11 hours a day, and that I also get to spend quality time with her.

In my previous management roles I had many mothers that worked for me. I found them the most hard-working employees. They did more in their 9-5 hours than some people did in 12 hours. They often arrived late or left a little to ensure they got through traffic in time to pick up their child. Most of them were full-time before having a child and then requested part-time after maternity leave, to which I always made work. As a manager I wanted the best people working for me, and if that meant they could only do a few days a week that was better for me than having a sub-standard employee full-time. I wish more managers and leaders thought like me.

One of the other problems with ECEC is the hours of operation. As the majority of parents work and need to travel in traffic or on public transport delays are a part of life. If

there was some way that centres could be more flexible regarding opening times to allow for extended business hours that a lot of people work, plus unforeseen (but frequent) traffic and transport delays, it would release some of the pressure on parents to rush from work to the centre.

5. Cost of ECEC

Childcare is a cost that is essential in many parents lives, and can be a large cost if they have a number of children attending. I think rebates should be increased if parents multiple children attending child care. This would ease some financial pressure and potentially encourage parents to return to work.

The rebate being paid directly to the centre is a great way for the government to assist in childcare and I don't think this should be changed. The rebate is definitely an incentive to me to work as it means that more of the money I earn goes to other household expenses rather than on child care.

I think the child care benefit should be reviewed as families are sometimes better off with a parent not working, than working and sending their child to day care.