

Dear Commissioner,

I am submitting this as my personal experiences and dilemmas of using childcare over the past 2 years, and then into the future. I'm not sure of the solutions, but need to express these gaping flaws so that they can be fixed.

Note: I am not fond of the concept of child care. I would love to be able to stay at home or work from home, so my children could stay at home until they attend school, or at least until they attend a preschool program for the year before school. But like most others, I need to work. I am lucky that I was able to find a childcare centre that offers a caring and nurturing environment that I am happy with.

MY STORY

THE BEGINNING

My husband and I live near Attunga NSW. We currently have a 4 year old daughter and 4 month old son. My husband works as a farm manager where we live, and I work in an office in Gunnedah. We have no other family within 400kms of our home.

I had my daughter in January 2011. When my daughter was born, I placed her on the waiting list for a recommended family day carer in Gunnedah. I had planned to return to work once she turned 1 (January 2012). In November 2011, a new centre opened in Tamworth, so we applied there and were successful in getting a spot. Our daughter started at the Tamworth Centre in January 2012 in the 'baby room'. She stayed in this room until she turned 2, then changed rooms to the 'toddler room'. When she turned 3 she was moved into the next room which is preschool.

Whilst we have 1 child, everything works perfectly (until school starts).

A NEW ADDITION

I became pregnant with our second child in January 2013, therefore my due date was October 2013. I planned to have 12 months off prior to returning to work. Childcare places are in such demand in Tamworth and Gunnedah that I put in an application form for our son to attend the same centre by June 2013, and be put on the wait list. He is not due to attend until October 2014, that's 16 months before my return to work date. At this stage, I'm not even sure if he has a spot.

So, I continued working during my pregnancy, until the end of September 2013, and our son was born in October 2013.

THE FIRST FLAW IN THE SYSTEM- Having a second and subsequent child.

My year of maternity leave is made up of: my work place maternity leave paid at half pay for 28 weeks, then the Government paid 'Paid Parental Leave' for 18 weeks, then my annual leave paid at half pay. This meant I could have the full 12 months off with my son, like I had with my daughter. Ideally, because I am at home, I could have my daughter at home to. Maybe only attending 1 day per week.

The problem is, that the Child Care rebate system only allows her to be absent from care for 42 days without penalty. But, if I did take her out of care, I would forfeit her place and not be guaranteed that she would have a spot for the days that I require her to be in care for my return to work. Therefore, our options are: take her out of care, put her back on the wait list for the day I return to work, and hope

they have a spot for her, or she has to continue to attend child care for the days I plan on working once I return to work, to ensure the days that I need her to be there are locked in. This creates a very large financial burden for the time that money coming into the household is much reduced.

Yes, your rebate percentage increases as the gross income drops, but it's also the cost of traveling to and from the centre on the days the child attends, plus all the other incidental costs involved (clothes, special childcare friendly foods).

Because places at centres are so highly sought after, centres should be able to offer 'maternity leave' places. So places of a determined length of time, so that when the child who 'owns' the spot needs to return to care, they can. Or we need many more centres or childcare providers as demand far exceeds the available places.

THE SECOND FLAW IN THE SYSTEM: Having children in school and child care.

So our family is now complete with 2 children.

My eldest child is due to start primary school in 2016. Once the oldest child starts school, a whole new set of problems emerges.

School children in NSW have around 15 weeks of holidays per year. This equates to 75 weekdays or maybe around 60 working days after public holidays are subtracted. So, because the child care rebates only allows for 42 absences per year, the child attending childcare still has to attend, even though at least 1 parent and the school age child could potentially be at home! This is insane. The child in childcare should also be able to stay home without penalty! Young children in care get very tired from it and really do need many more breaks than children that attend school. The childcare facilities are required to educate the children, therefore these are basically mini schools. The young children need breaks from this constant education environment, but they can't because of the limits imposed.

Children who attend childcare should be able to have at least as many days off as school holidays without penalty. Therefore increase the allowable days off to 75 or more. If a parent wishes to have their child at home for school holidays to be with other siblings, shouldn't it be the parents prerogative? And in the best interest in the young child to do this and spend time with family?

THE THIRD FLAW IN THE SYSTEM: Juggling school hours and school holidays with a parents employment.

My husband works on a farm, and generally he has to be at work at 0730. I have to be at work in Gunnedah by 0730, so leave home at 0630. Our child care centre hours are from 0700 to 1800. We drop our child off at 0700 and she is picked up at about 1630.

Once our first child starts school, either my husband or myself has to negotiate with our employer to change start and finish times so that we can drop off, and pick up our children at the right times. This is going to be very hard for us to manage and we aren't sure whether our employers will allow it. All public schools should at least offer after school care until 1630 or 1700hrs to allow working families' time to work a decent number of hours per day. After school care in centres is ok, but they can only utilise this until they are 12 in most centres! What do the children do that are over this age? Stage at home by themselves?

When I became pregnant, I started to worry about how we are going to balance our work and family life once our children attend school. The amount of annual leave we have does not cover all the school holidays that children have. I'm already worried about what we are going to do. We have no family near to rely on. I've enrolled in university to try and become a teacher myself, so that I can be home during the holidays with my children, but this isn't scheduled to be completed until 2020! My only option is to take leave without pay with my employer, but as school holidays are premium times for annual leave in general, they can't guarantee that I can take the school holidays off every year.

I'd like to see a system similar to paid parental leave that parent can be paid the PPL amount to stay home with their children during school holidays, or maybe incentives to employers to allow staff to do this.

CHILD CARE CENTRES and EDUCATORS

Childcare centres are so bound by the learning outcomes that even children in the 'baby room' (0-2yrs) the activities are based around some type of learning. It's really tiring for them. They need to be able to be children and just play. This totally structured learning environment is hard on these little tiny ones. They get burnt out. Can we ease up on the strict learning outcome until a child is 4 and they are preparing for school?

Thank you for your time.