

My name is Kerry Arch and I am the founder of an advocacy group, United Sole Parents of Australia. I would like to outline some of the difficulties members of my advocacy group face in relation to childcare. The majority of the members of my group are sole parents with little or no family support.

When a child transitions from child care to their first year of primary school, a business practice of most long daycare centres is to end care in the weeks leading up to Christmas and not reenrol the child in the 3 or 4 weeks of the new year before the child goes to school. This leaves families without care for some 5 to 6 weeks. The Abbott government says that the best form of welfare is a job, however most employers will not keep a job open for a single parent to care for their child for 5-6 weeks over Christmas simply because they do not have adequate childcare. This is a crucial time for sole parents to become unemployed as most are facing mutual obligation requirements with their child's 6th birthday looming. To become unemployed shortly before required to work for 15 hours a week or commence seeking employment is unfathomable.

When offering placements to children and families in childcare centres, the initial places have a legislated priority system with children at risk being of highest priority, with the second priority going to children of single parent households who meet the work training study test and thirdly all other children. This only applies to initial placements and centre Directors do not apply this priority system to ongoing care needs for families; they make a decision on business need to ongoing care, namely filling vacancies with children who will occupy care at the centre for a whole year rather than children who will be leaving the centre in a few weeks time after school holidays are over to maximise their financial position. Again it does not assist families over the Christmas period who need care for their children to attend work. Vacation care facilities can legally take these children however most decline to as it is not in the best interests of the child to attend a new childcare facility for 3 or 4 weeks before starting at a new school. In short, our childcare facilities often fail to meet the needs of the children they currently care for in favour of making a profit at the end of the day.

For those parents who live in regional Australia, many after school care programs will not provide care for children beyond 10 years of age because of a high demand on their service. Often they are the only provider in the geographic area. There is a significant lack of Family Daycare provided across regional Australia to fill the gap. Child care services are required to have staff to child ratios as well as a minimum amount of floor space (measured in square metres) per child. Therefore places are limited and children are often left to get themselves home from school and remain unsupervised until their parent returns home from work. Most Family Daycare providers in any location also work under the same regulations and most providers choose to cater to children under school age to ensure that they have a continuous income stream.

Many members of my group have children with special needs including autism and epilepsy. Most long day care centres apply for additional inclusion support funding for these children however they also charge the parents an additional fee to provide care to these children. Many centres cannot cope with a special needs child and ask the families to find alternate care. When the child reaches school age, the only care available to these children is formal schooling because it is a legal requirement that the child attends somewhere. A major issue families of special needs children face is the lack of after school care and vacation care. Parents can only work during school hours because there are a lack of suitable child care places available.

Suggested outcomes

Expanding the Registered Care rate of Child Care Benefit to cover children up to the age of 16; or at least to a minimum age of 12 and allowing for care after hours and on weekends to cater for those parents who are employed as shift workers and in hospitality jobs.

Incentives for long day care centres, before & after school care providers and vacation care providers to have inclusion support places for children with special needs. This may include streamlining the application process for additional inclusion support funding and making special needs in-service training for childcare staff more accessible.

Incentives for people to operate a family daycare business that caters to outside school hours care and vacation care for children that are school age, especially in regional Australia. Particularly for sole parents that are transitioning from Parenting Payment Single to Newstart. This would include measures to ensure that these participants are meeting the activity test and would be exempt from many of the standard participation requirements provided they are working their daycare business.