

OCCASSIONAL CARE: A FLEXIBLE CHILDCARE OPTION FOR RURAL AUSTRALIA

What is Occasional Care?

Occasional care is just that – occasional. It provides support to parents and important early learning and social experiences for children aged 0-6 years. The Take a Break Occasional Care initiative was created to give parents and caregivers a break or seek employment while their children learn and socialise. Sessions are shorter than long day care and vary between facilities. For example those under three can attend for 3 hours and those over 3 years can attend for 5 or 6 hours.

Background:

Occasional care has existed for over 15 years in parts of Victoria with 220 centres (over 100 of these were in rural locations) supporting some 9700 children at its peak. In recent years Occasional care was jointly funded by the Commonwealth and State Governments.

In June 2010, the former Federal Labor Government withdrew its funding for the Take a Break Occasional care program. The former Victorian Labor Government announced it would meet this Commonwealth shortfall throughout 2010 and contributed a total \$1.9 million to the program.

In May 2011, the Victorian Coalition made no provision in its budget to continue funding Occasional Care arguing the Commonwealth must reinstate the funds they withdrew in 2010.

Many Occasional care programs in Victoria ceased in 2011, however some areas were successful with fundraising efforts or secured funding from local government to ensure the initiative continued.

In June 2011, Liberal Shadow Minister for Childcare and Early Childhood Learning, The Hon Susan Ley committed the Tony Abbot Coalition to:

“restore the \$12million ripped from Occasional Care by Federal Labor”.

In Parliament on 31st October Ms Ley acknowledged that:

“in rural communities in particular, this care has proved to be invaluable to, for example, farming families during the harvest or shearing season” .

In response to the Shadow Government’s commitment on 2011, The Hon Wendy Lovell, Victorian Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development stated:

“The funding of childcare is a federal responsibility, but the Victorian Government has committed to continue its share of funding for Take a Break if the Federal Government also puts its money back in”

Unfortunately, the program is still without any Commonwealth or State funding and remain reliant on fundraising and local government.

Why rural areas need Occasional Care:

No Alternatives: For some towns this is the only child minding facility – its removal leaves rural families at a disadvantage with no option for any other child care.

Flexibility: Farming families see Occasional care as the best service to meet their needs, it is flexible and does not lock families into a regular childcare placement. Rather parents can use the service when they need it.

Safety: Many farming families use Occasional care to complete jobs on farm that would be too dangerous for a child to be around. (For example: tractor and cattle work)

Isolation: Children from farms are often isolated and occasional care provides social interaction.

Community: In small rural communities the Occasional care facility generally also runs the 3 year fun group and kinder. They are the hub of rural community life. Occasional care provides an introduction to the other services operating out of the facility and creates an opportunity for rural children to form friendships with like minded children that can last right through kindergarten and primary school. The closure of Occasional care would most likely see a break down in local community links.

Why other forms of childcare don't work as well as occasional care

There are two other models of childcare other than occasional care; these are:

Long Day Care:

Centres providing long day care operate for at least 8 hours a day on normal working days for a minimum of 48 weeks per year. Families are required to secure a permanent place and pay for the service even if their child cannot attend a session.

Families using occasional care do not want 8 hours of care like that provided under the long day care model, nor can they afford to pay for 8 hours. The flexibility of Occasional care allows families to use the service as they need it.

Family Day Care:

Family Day care is a network of carers who provide care and developmental activities in their own homes for other people's children. Generally five children attend a session at each house.

Families using Occasional care see the benefits of larger group interaction rather than five children in someone's home like that provided under the family day care model.