

Submission No: 193

Authorised:

JRC 13/6/06

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Member for Mackellar

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12th December 2005

Dear Minister,

I am writing to you in light of your current review of "Childcare and Working Families", reported in the newspapers.

My ongoing participation in paid employment comes from two needs, common with many other parents - the obvious need for income and maintenance of my employability. Taking several years out of the workforce reduces my knowledge of current practices and consequently will make me virtually unemployable. This is a feature of Australia's employment market.

I wish to bring to your attention our family's dilemma on this subject. Whilst I appreciate these details are on a personal level, I believe that our specific example relates to many other working parents.

1. I am a working mother of two young children, employed in the NSW Government. Long day care in the Northern Beaches area, where we live, is severely under resourced and at crisis point! This is now compounded by the specifics:
 - Two children to be placed
 - One child is affected by an Anaphylaxis* food allergy
 - Days of work are fixed
 - Working hours necessitate "long day" care.
2. In reality, there is a lack of priority given to working parents requiring care over parents who are not participating in the workforce. Thus, my family are forced to use informal services of other parents who are not working, simply in order to allow me to attend paid employment. If this is a "Black Market", what choice do we now have?

As a parent of two very young children, I certainly empathise with "home" mums' need for "time out", however, in light of the real and documented crisis being faced in certain areas of Sydney, I feel that it is important to differentiate between "desirable" and "necessary" access to childcare places.

It is also relevant that the occasional spaces that do become available do not coincide with my working day requirements. The nature of my employment does not allow working days to be adjusted to suit childcare. Again, we need to ensure that working parents get first priority for the choice of days in line with employment constraints.

3. The gap between the stated "family friendly workplace" and actuality. I am currently employed in the NSW Public Service. Since returning from maternity leave of my second child, my

* A potentially life threatening situation requiring first aid knowledge and preventative care management. It currently affects 2-3% of the childhood population and is a growing phenomenon.

employment has been changed to 3 days a week to allow me to provide a correct level of parenting to my children. I face severe difficulties in obtaining any certainty that this arrangement will continue. Despite the policy of being *family friendly*, the reality differs. From conversations with other mothers; this is not an isolated case.

As I approach the end of my part time tenure, I am preparing myself for a difficult situation in justifying my ongoing need for part time working arrangements. This places a high level of stress on my ability to both work and maintain a healthy family life, to ensure my children's emotional development is not jeopardised.

4. The "black market" that is spoken of has grown due to a desperate need to obtain any childcare. This is invariably of substandard quality, temporary in nature and costly versus the registered childcare providers, i.e. council family day care & centres. Thus working mothers such as I, that cannot afford nannies and paradoxically are being paid at a level where childcare benefits are insignificant (i.e. \$2.20 per day), have no choice but to take whatever informal and unregistered care is available. This generally involves paying mothers who are already drawing significant childcare benefits from being at home and having no declared income. This is also a paradoxical situation and is soaking up public money, given these families also seem to have preference in obtaining formal childcare, at significantly subsidised rates.

One wonders at the agenda of the recently published study that says that working mothers will still work no matter what they pay for childcare (refer S.M.H., 05/12/05).

Ideally I would be delighted to see:

- i. A solution addressing critical childcare shortages in various Sydney regions, including the Northern Beaches area (*please refer to the accompanying table (Attachment B) that outlines a record of my recent search for formal childcare services in the northern beaches area*).
- ii. Enforcing the order of prioritisation given to working parents and access to proper childcare.
- iii. Affordable childcare structured in a manner that encourages mothers to take part in the workforce, without merely working to pay the childcare.
- iv. Government support - driving legislative and other changes to ensure that workplaces, particularly government, are truly "family friendly".

Thank you for your time in reading this. I would be very happy to provide you with any relevant information in regard to our household's experiences in balancing workplace and childcare services.

Yours sincerely,