

Since my son was diagnosed with autism I feel like we have been isolated from the rest of the community. It has had a profound effect on my employment, self esteem, social interaction and relationships. I feel like I am on endless waiting lists, constantly being rejected for support because of a lack of funding or resources, been overlooked for intervention programs because the diagnosis given by DADHC (a government department) made him appear to be higher functioning than what he actually is. I have had to quit working (as a single mother) because the current funding meant I was not entitled to assistance or intervention programs because I was working. It felt like I was being punished for trying to do the best I could for my family. I was a single mother working full time because their father walked out and was a \$26 a month dad until the recent changes. I am still highly cynical about whether or not the CSA will actually do their job for a change and get some money off him, to add insult to injury CSA & Centrelink do not take disability into account with regard to the child's father, WHY NOT? I was working full time, had two preschool aged children, not receiving child support from their father and being told that because I worked I was not entitled to programs and funding for autism. I also find that DADHC and other agencies only have information sessions, support group meetings and other types of conferences on weekdays - there is very little to no catering to the needs of those of us who are actually attempting to participate in the workforce. In fact I felt as though I was almost being punished for it and their father was rightfully able to walk away scott free of all responsibility.

If the government expects me to stand on my own two feet for working then they should ensure their agencies that are supposed to support me are not failing. For example;

- DADHC sent me a letter telling me my son was too intelligent to be considered disabled and therefore did not meet the criteria to be eligible for their services. Zane was completely non-verbal and displayed major behavioural problems and had profoundly delayed communication skills when I received this letter a few years ago and it was signed by the doctor who diagnosed him!!! I was completely dumbfounded.
- The Child Support Agency has never followed up on the outstanding money their father owes me, I doubt the new changes are anything other than a government public relations stunt to buy votes.
- Centrelink have on more occasions than I can count made errors on my payments which have resulted in debts, the most recent being that I rang and changed my income when I returned to the workforce, well Centrelink updated my FTB details but not my Carer details and I continued to receive the pension for 2 more payments before I figured out what was going on and rang them again to correct their mistake - I am still paying for their mistake and still owe about \$1000 because of THEIR ERROR!!
- The Department of Education and Training attempted to put Zane into mainstream school, it was only me asking whether or not I sued the school or DET when he absconded and was injured because of their negligent decision to place him in mainstream, that I was taken seriously. He was then placed into an autism support class. Finally through DET, because of the 'special placement' scenario that by default Zane now met the criteria to receive DADHC's services once again. Ironically and as foreseen by me (BUT NOBODY IN ANY GOVERNMENT POSITION THAT COULD MAKE A DIFFERENCE WOULD LISTEN OR CARE) The teacher in this class could not handle his behaviour and we had to spend 3 – 6 months trying to convince the "powers that be" at DET that this child needed much more than they could offer. Zane is now in a specific autism class in a special needs only school.

- The Department of Housing rejected my claim for priority housing saying I failed to meet the criteria. The criteria I failed on was that I had the ability to seek housing without their assistance. Basically because I had internet access and a vehicle to be able to go and look at prospective rental properties I failed their criteria. OUTRAGEOUS! I met every other criteria except because I am not a complete derelict of society and try my best to not allow autism to completely swallow our family into poverty I get rejected! Imagine for one moment attending an open house inspection, the rental market is extremely competitive at this time, you dress up to look your best, arrive on time, park a little up the street so they don't notice your 15 year old car over the brand new ones everybody else rocked up in, you don't have your husband with you like everybody else seems to and then your kid starts jumping on the furniture, running up and down any stairs, makes whooping noises and screams with laughter in every empty room because he loves the echoes.
- I only started to receive government funded respite AFTER I quit my job. Go figure – a single mum who was working full time and had another child was “not entitled to respite” according to a few Centrelink workers. A few years later I find this is not the case at all.
- I have been given incorrect information from Centrelink staff more times than I care to count. I have no idea how Centrelink's call centre can be considered world class and is used for benchmarking around the country. Had the decision been left to Centrelink's clients, I highly doubt the client would consider their calls resolved anywhere near as much as Centrelink staff must be recording. I would like to see the record of how much incorrect advice Centrelink staff give out – it's a different story from almost every customer support officer you speak with.
- Zane was diagnosed at 3 years old with autism, he is now 8 and just two days ago I received a letter stating an appointment time is available. How is 5 years waiting acceptable? And this is how lovely the letter is, if I fail to contact them within 3 weeks then my file will be closed. That's it, after 5 years of waiting I get a cold letter saying hurry up or lose out.
- If I have one more health care professional assume I am a Mrs or call me Mrs Tyler (my children have their fathers last name and I don't) I am going to scream. On questioning a few about it, apparently they are taught to address us all this way when they are studying at TAFE or University or wherever and this is to be non-assuming or non-discriminatory. Personally I find it offensive they assume I am married or use the title Mrs just because I have children. Their father has done as little as possible to contribute to his children and I don't see why he should by default be given any recognition.
- I have had major difficulty with special needs child care services, in particular before and after school care.
- I spend more time proving my eligibility for services than I have ever received – how can we reduce forms, forms, forms, forms, and more forms? In this day and age of technology do I need to keep proving my eligibility every time I seek help? Is there not some national recognition we can get to reduce the number of forms we need to complete?

I wish I could measure the failures I have experienced from government services. The recent changes to CSA are a small sign of the government showing some accountability for past failings. One of the only recent changes I can honestly say has positively impacted me was the additional funding for respite care. I was lucky to have been one of the recipients, because of the nature of this document I will however point out that the only reason I had not received it in the past was due to systematic failures.

The above is really just the icing on the cake for my experiences. I hope the House of Representatives will truly take note of my story and the stories of so many people like me and I am so grateful to know we may finally be heard. I hope you truly understand the significance of the decisions you make. I would much rather in ten years time be writing about what the government "got right" than what they didn't.

Grace

You can contact me at