

Formal submission

When we had our first child, the thought of placing him into childcare full time at the age of six months was daunting; to feel that you had the confidence in the carers at the centre to adequately provide the care that my son needed was something I previously did not consider. However, upon visiting and talking to numerous staff at many childcare centres, my thoughts did turn to such concerns. Although I attended and put my son's name down at no less than six childcare centres, I was very lucky to get a place at only one of those, despite asking for full time care. The cost of this was \$100 a day thus \$500 a week. My husband and I are not eligible for CCB but we were able to receive the CCR, which was a welcome payment to assist us. Much discussion was had at work about how many mothers still choose to go back to work after having children even though they are, in effect, working for an extra \$50-\$100 a week after childcare fees have been paid for. I knew what they were talking about. Unfortunately, we had to pull our son out of full time childcare due to the numerous illnesses he was constantly getting from childcare from other children. I initially thought he would be able to build up a great immune system however, my doctor said that this would only happen if he got the chance to overcome the illnesses, which he was not. Ultimately, his immune system was on the way to being weaker as he was not getting the opportunity to fully overcome the illnesses and was constantly under the weather. As a result, we were advised by the doctor that he needed to have his days at childcare reduced so as to enable him to get better. We ultimately ended up getting a nanny to come over to our residence three days a week to look after him at home and kept him in childcare for two days a week; his health improved quite quickly and we kept that arrangement until I gave birth to my second son.

Whilst on maternity leave with my second son, my first son stayed home with me. However, upon returning to work after my second period of maternity leave, again, I found it very difficult to find a childcare centre to place two children in full time. Furthermore, the cost of placing two children into full time childcare was horrendous. So we decided to have an au pair which cost a fraction of the price of full time childcare. I did however place my oldest son into childcare for two days a week and my youngest son for one day a week for socialisation and to allow the au pair a break. However, my younger son, even at one day a week, was constantly ill and again, I was advised to take him out of childcare, so I did. I was generally satisfied with the au pair and the convenience was fantastic; I was able to get up and get ready for work without having the morning battles each and every day and night times were made easier with an extra pair of hands around to help and both boys remained quite healthy.

Upon falling pregnant with my third child (there are three years and one month between my oldest and my youngest), the thought of the cost of childcare and actually finding a centre that would accept three children full time mid year (as I was returning to work in July) was again, daunting. I was advised that in order to keep a place, I had to pay the fees for my children from the beginning of the year, despite me being on maternity leave on half pay otherwise the centres could not save a place for me. So effectively, I would have had to have paid for childcare I was not utilising. This was not affordable nor what I had envisaged.

Whilst on maternity leave, I was able to get my oldest son into a centre two days a week starting at the beginning of the year; my younger son could not get into that same childcare centre so he stayed at home with my daughter and I. As it was, two days' worth of childcare fees was close to \$200 and me being on half pay meant that the budget was stretched. I could not find a childcare centre that would take three children (of the age group of my three children) full time mid year so we arranged for my in-laws to move in and look after the children upon my return to work. This was much more affordable. However, after 12 months, it was time to part ways and to find ourselves a childcare centre for the children. During this time our oldest son had been diagnosed with autism and the carers at the centre did not know how to deal with him and nor did they seem interested to learn. I was able to get my oldest son into a pre-kindy school program at an independent school and the teacher and the aide were fantastic. There was a cost associated with this too being an independent rather than a public school. My youngest son had been going to a different childcare centre and we increased his days for 3 months prior to my in-laws moving out in the hope that he could transfer to fulltime and that my daughter would be able to get a full time position as well. This did not come to fruition. The centre could only offer care for my daughter, due to her age, from 0830-1530h which was not sustainable nor suitable for our work hours, which were 0730-1630h daily. In the end, we were lucky enough to transfer my son and to get my daughter into a bigger childcare centre full time in July. I found it quite amazing to be able to do so given we had put their names down at again, no less than six childcare centres and only one was able to accommodate us. The childcare fees for two children per week was quite high and again, we were only able to receive the CCR which was a great help. By this stage though, we had also been introduced to the therapies that my son required to assist with his autism; these costs are not cheap. I was grateful to receive the FACHSIA package for children with autism and our son wouldn't be where he is today without it. His funding ran out pretty quickly due to the costs for the therapies he was undertaking on a weekly basis. Thus childcare and therapy costs began to increase more and more.

Only about a year after my oldest son was diagnosed with autism, my youngest son was also diagnosed with autism. Thus two lots of therapy costs on top of childcare expenses and school fees started to eat into our incomes as we still had all everyday living expenses to pay for as well. My daughter from a very young age was dragged to and from therapies for the boys. Again we gratefully received the FACHSIA funding to assist with therapy costs; it has now run out.

At this point in time, my oldest son goes to a Catholic School with the associated costs and appears to obtain the further attention he needs; my younger son goes to a school for children with special needs which also has a higher cost than a public school and mainstream Catholic Schools and it is the best thing we could have done for him; my older son goes to a mainstream Catholic School with a casual aide to assist. My daughter is still in childcare full time and both boys go to before and after school care as well. On average, we pay \$425 a week in childcare fees and approximately \$400 a week in OOSH fees. Again we receive the CCR which is quite helpful and for which we are grateful. On top of that are the therapist fees we pay. Each son undertakes Occupational Therapy once a week and speech pathology once a fortnight. This cost amounts to approximately \$700 a fortnight in therapy

fees. After exhausting private health cover, EPC and GPMHCP, by about July of each year, we must meet these costs wholly ourselves. Thus, our incomes are stretched by the additional financial commitments we have due to a combination of therapy costs and childcare/OOSH fees. There are also miscellaneous additional costs associated with ensuring our boys have access to regulating tools when required which is like a roundabout; the costs don't seem to disappear ever but do slow down at times.

Another factor that concerns us is the ability and interest in those persons at OOSH and childcare centres who are equipped and actually have an interest in (and the time) to deal with children with special needs. Although the OOSH personnel do try hard, none of them have the actual training and do the best they can. The childcare carers had no idea and it seemed to be much too much of a hindrance to effectively learn about and engage in those tactics to assist the boys with their issues in that environment. The request to get an extra helper took so long to process and be approved by the government that our younger son only had a month or two left at the centres before the extra help arrived. At my youngest son's last centre, there was one fabulous person who took a very keen interest in him and his issues and actively sought out information and engaged with our therapists to be able to provide him with greater more appropriate care. Unfortunately, that carer left the centre to pursue further education; no-one ever took such a keen and active interest since. I also purchased over \$500 worth of apparatus and items for the childcare centre to utilise for my son and other children as relevant during the day to help regulate him and keep him in a calm state; that equipment was never put to use during my son's time at the centre.

My experience with childcare centres has thus been that they are extremely difficult to get into, are quite expensive especially once you have two or more children that require care and that the carers do not necessarily have the interest, desire or knowledge to deal with children with special needs.

In relation to special needs children, I am very grateful for the FACHSIA funding that is provided which expires when the child reaches the age of seven. I understand that this is because it is the school system that the responsibility is transferred onto once children with special needs reach school age. Although my boys have been receiving some additional assistance at school, it is definitely not to the degree and standard nor the intensity that they have experienced prior to attending school. The school system does not offer one on one Occupational Therapy on a weekly basis and nor does it offer one on one speech therapy or psychologist sessions. These are additional support we must and still do provide our boys outside of the school system which comes at a cost; a cost which is on top of OOSH and childcare expenses. If one of us didn't work, we would not be able to afford the therapies that are helping our boys and us in living with autism.

I am moving away with work in the next couple of months and my husband will be looking after the children in my absence. This fact, combined with the concerns we have whereby OOSH personnel have no training in dealing with children with special needs, means that we are looking for a nanny to assist with looking after the children morning, afternoon and night. That way, we can send the person off for relevant training (attending a course or two) for autism and sensory processing disorder and would thus be able to provide the support

and have the techniques to help the boys in their daily lives. The ratio of the carer and children would be much better and the constant presence of that one person would also be beneficial rather than the boys being exposed to the constant changing and turn over of staff at OOSH. Routine, consistency and someone who understands and initiates techniques to assist the boys would be of great benefit. Thus the desirability of hiring a nanny. However, the barrier is cost. It would cost us about \$800 a week to hire a nanny. Unlike OOSH and childcare, there is currently no eligibility for CCB or CCR for a nanny. Thus we would be meeting this cost ourselves with no assistance from the government.

As you can no doubt assume, I am a very big supporter of nannies being capable of attracting the CCB and CCR not only to ease the burden of costs associated with such but also as a means by which to open up options for families for childcare for their precious children as well as to allow adequately trained and interested carers to be able to appropriately care for children with special needs. However, the cost is the great prohibition. Even though families such as ours that earn good incomes may, on the face of it, be able to easily afford a nanny, the reality is often quite different, especially when families have children with special needs and thus the extra costs that are associated thereto.

I thus support nannies being allowed to have the CCB and CCR attached to them however, recommend that you be mindful as to placing a means test upon such. You will only ever know the true costs each family has by getting each individual family to identify what costs they do actually have that are genuine medical and therapy costs for their children rather than relying upon a figure with no contextual information provided.