

# 'Pick up a childcare enrolment form with your pregnancy testing kit'

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## AVAILABILITY

Read Online [2]

## EXCERPTS

In the haze of newborn land - closely monitoring sleep, feeding and baby milestones - I raised my head above the fog and began to think about returning to work. Six months maternity leave seemed like an age when I was pregnant, but now that I was holding this tiny person it didn't seem very long at all.

We started investigating childcare centres when my son was three months old. I started researching online, ringing around and dropping in. This in itself was quite confronting. Here I am with our precious new child looking around at long daycare centres and considering which strangers to entrust the care of my child to.

It didn't help a guilty new mum to be met with the idea that I actually wouldn't even get to choose. Curt responses, wide eyes and at one point I was met with laughter at the thought I could secure childcare within three months.

Centre managers took great pride in informing me I was the idiot and clearly missing my village. Their waiting lists were approximately two years long; some centres couldn't even say how long the wait would be. They were happy to add me to their list and to accept my deposit with a 10-minute tour, a five-minute talk, without a second glance. Add to that the guilt, anxiety and stress of returning to work as a new mum and it's a horrible time in a new parent's life.

One colleague told me her childcare centre director was second only to her husband in knowing she was pregnant. Another told me how jealous she was of IVF parents as they often had a six-week head start in confirming their pregnancy and getting a 'competitive advantage' on the waiting list.

So from that day on I devised a game plan.

Plan A: secure immediate short-term care to ensure I could return to work. Cue crisis childcare in the form of my parents. Luckily my parents were youthful enough to cope with a baby and too busy running a small business to be off gallivanting around the world. Knowing my child was safe and happy with someone who loved him made my return to work so much easier.

Plan B: Identify and target childcare centres in my area. The game plan included getting to know the centre manager by name, dropping in to donate egg boxes to the kindy kids and basically calling to see how everything is going every second week.

Surely there has to be a better way? When you finally secure a childcare spot you can see how stretched the educators are and you understand why they don't call you back. They are doing it for the love and not the pittance they earn.

Centres are bogged down with parents who are 'just touching base/stalking', parents who have listed on anywhere between four to eight waiting lists in Brisbane and anywhere up to fifteen different waiting lists in Sydney and Melbourne. Parents who begrudge paying multiple deposits and not hearing from a centre and as a result don't notify a centre when they receive a place somewhere else or circumstances change.

Directors spend a disproportionate amount of time talking to people who will never become their customers because of the limited space available and as a result, less time doing the really important things like managing their early learning staff, running a centre and ensuring everything is shipshape.

While the Productivity Commission are making some positive changes such as moving to a single payment system, supporting a more inclusive model for children with additional needs, targeting children from disadvantaged backgrounds to access childcare and lifting the cap on occasional care, we are not seeing a huge overhaul, just a bit of tinkering around the edges.

Parents are looking for affordable, access to high quality childcare with educators who care. Not meeting any one of these needs has a real effect on parent's relationships in the home and at work.

There is no single solution to improve childcare in Australia. We fundamentally changed the rules of the game when we left behind a not

for profit model in the 1980s. With market forces, geography, government subsidies, regulations and the National Quality Framework in the mix childcare is a complex problem, which requires a complex solution.

So my advice to new parents is grab your rabbits foot, your four-leaf clover and touch some wood. Pick up a childcare enrolment form with your pregnancy testing kit because you can't rely on the process. You are going to need luck and a game plan to get a place in a metropolitan childcare centre in Australia and that's not going to change anytime soon!

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**Region:** Australia and New Zealand <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** affordability <sup>[4]</sup>

accessibility <sup>[5]</sup>

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