



## **'Gastro seven times': How childcare hits parents with a triple whammy**

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**Highlight:** Parents face a 'triple whammy' with a sick child in daycare, missing work, paying fees, and then facing the risk of getting sick themselves.

### **Body**

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When Fiona Maine drops one-year-old Freddy at his daycare centre, it annoys her if she notices another child looking sickly.

"I have heard of many parents, if their kids are sick, they'll give them Panadol or Nurofen and send them off, knowing they'll have to go pick them up once it wears off. Just so they can have half a day of daycare, they can work and get paid for it," she says.

Freddy has been attending daycare in Sydney five days a week since he was four months old. The 31-year-old pregnant mother of four [cannot work](#) in her tech support role while he is home.

"I can't take phone calls while looking after a baby. Honestly, he gets sick once every couple of weeks. [I feel] a bit rotted because we still have to pay for it."

It's a common complaint heard around the nation from parents with children in daycare who get sent home sick. Jay Weatherill, the former premier of South [Australia](#), now leads early education campaign Thrive by Five and says parents with young children are stuck in an impossible position.

"Parents are doing it really tough right now through the spiralling cost-of-living, but it's a triple whammy for parents when their children are sick," he says.

"Not only are they caring for a sick child, which is stressful enough on its own, they are also grappling with the out-of-pocket costs for a day of childcare and the lost earnings or leave due to being unable to attend work."

Melanie Allen is a Pilates instructor and works for herself while her children Henry, 3, and Edie, 10 months, attend daycare in Adelaide.

"Money-wise, it's hard. And the daycare fee being so high makes it harder," Allen says.

"I never factored in how much it would cost in daycare to have them both in. And then I was like, why? Why, when school is free? Why isn't daycare subsidised to the point that it's free as well?"

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"What burns is paying for them not to be there, staying home, and not getting paid. So, say I make \$250 in a day; I don't make that money, and then I also have to pay another \$170.

"And then, knowing that might go through my second kid, and then also through me and then to my husband, because if one of us is sick, the other one's going to have to take off work so they can look after the kids. So it's just a cycle, a vicious cycle."

Weatherill says the early childhood education and care workforce [is in crisis because of low pay](#), poor conditions and staff shortages as well as providers with ongoing overheads that they can't turn off when a child enrolled at their service is ill.

"What all this adds up to is a system in need of complete reform. Providers need certainty, early childhood educators need proper pay and conditions, parents need financial support and children need access to the enormous benefits that arise from participation in high quality early learning."

Georgie Dent, chief executive of The Parenthood, a campaign partner of Thrive by Five, says **Australia** needs to move to a system that is more affordable for families and closer to the school experience.

"This would mean it's not a system where families are spending hundreds of dollars out of pocket on a day. And so it then would become less of an issue if your child was sick or not sick," she says.

Shayne Kuyper and his partner enrolled their two-year-old daughter, Poppy, in daycare when she was 13 months old. She had never been sick before daycare.

"She hasn't had a single week without coming home with something since," Kuyper says. "She's had gastro seven times this year."

They navigate Poppy's sick days at their home in Melbourne by splitting the day in half.

"[My partner] will take her for the morning, and I'll take her for the afternoon. Which means that we've each missed half a day of work.

"It's painful that you still have to pay for these sick days. And you're allocated [52] days a year - beyond that, you lose your government subsidy. So, if we have more absent days, we pay the full rate. It's unavoidable; they'll get sick at daycare, but we're punished for it."

Nesha Hutchinson, vice-president of the Australian Childcare Alliance, says rostering staff for a position in a childcare centre means it's impossible to avoid charging fees if a child is away sick.

"If there are 10 children in the preschool room, or five in the toddler's room, we have to pay for that staff member whether or not the child turns up," Hutchinson says.

"If two children are sick on a day, does the staff member get paid 80 per cent of their wages because the children are off? That's important to consider, given that wages are the highest cost for a childcare centre. And we can't overbook like they do on planes, hotels or restaurants as it's illegal."

Hutchinson says "educators get very sick, particularly in their first year in early education", contributing to a high staff turnover within the first year of employment.

Emily Holmes, 25, is a childcare educator working in South East Melbourne. She says most of her fellow educators have used their sick leave entitlements.

"We get sick quite a lot in general, but it is the same in every centre I've ever worked at," she says.

Federal Early Childhood Education Minister **Anne Aly** said the childcare subsidy will continue to be paid for 52 absences a year, after it was increased from 42 a year due to the pandemic.

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"Supporting and growing the early childhood education and care workforce is critical to delivering our landmark cheaper childcare reforms - which is why we have a plan to deliver a stronger and sustainable early childhood education workforce," she said in a statement.

[Link to Image](#)

James Brickwood

"We're increasing the number of university spots, bringing forward fee-free TAFE places, changing the Fair Work Act to allow multi-employer bargaining and taking action to close the gender pay gap - all of which will benefit the early childhood education sector."

The government has committed to a Productivity Commission review into the early childhood education and care sector, looking into how to improve affordability and access for families, including considering a universal 90 per cent Child Care Subsidy rate.

Elke Bremner has two sons in daycare in Sydney's West Killara. Her husband, Seth, is often overseas for work, leaving her in a tough spot when they're ill and he's away.

"Your work doesn't stop just because your kids are sick," she says. "So, I was having to still make up the time. When my child was sleeping; or at night, I was working after the kids were in bed each night just trying to catch up on everything.

"I don't know of many families that can afford to be living in Sydney at the moment and not have both parents working."

To fill the daycare gap, Sharon Mitchell wakes up at 3am, goes for a run on the treadmill and gets ready to answer her phone at 4am. Mitchell runs Mayday Mummy, an emergency nanny service on the north shore of Sydney.

"The phone absolutely does ring and early in the morning. It's ad-hoc, emergency, last minute. We're not a permanent nanny solution. I would only have anyone on the Mayday Mummy team that I would feel comfortable in my own home, looking after my own family," she says.

The rate is \$65 an hour. Mitchell acknowledges most parents may not earn enough to cover the minimum three-hour callout fee, but they are available if something goes pear-shaped and parents need somebody to step in. She adds that there is more than enough work for her company and welcomes competition.

"If there are other people out there that can support families in these difficult situations, I say: Absolutely, you know. Please help, because there's so much need out there."

Mitchell backs up Fiona Maine's revelation about parents doing the "Panadol drop and run".

"They know that when a phone call comes in, at midday, the Panadol is worn off," she said.

"I was speaking to a daycare centre, it was a while ago, and they actually stopped parents providing the babies' bottles made up because they found that some parents were actually putting Panadol and Nurofen into the baby's bottle, knowing that they would then have an extra dose of Panadol and Nurofen at lunchtime in their bottle."

Dr Lachlan Macarthur, a GP at Mona Vale Medical Centre, says one of the benefits of having children spend time around lots of different children is that they become exposed to a wide variety of common viruses. The immune system is then able to create a response, allowing immunity to increase for a period of time.

"Like a great many other families with whom I have worked, my daughter had a number of illnesses this year, including COVID-19 in February and Influenza A in June," he says.

Macarthur says the frustration or concern with shifting around work roles pales in the face of a seriously unwell child.

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"I understand that it can be difficult to adapt pre-planned schedules and work commitments when one's child is unwell. I am lucky to work in a profession that allows, perhaps, a greater level of flexibility when it comes to taking carer's leave."

But for Maine, who has been taking her children to daycare for the past five years, the battle will continue.

"So I just kind of put up with it and pay the fee instead of fighting it," she says.

"Even a discount would be appreciated."

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After this article was published, a preschool sports program depicted in a photograph contacted this masthead to say it offers makeup classes for classes missed due to illness.

## Graphic

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Early Childhood Education Minister **Anne Aly**.

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