



Dear Parents & Families

Since early March this year, the Early Childhood Education and Care sector has seen massive downturns due to the coronavirus situation, with many services having to make the incredibly difficult decision to close their doors. Other services, such as ours, have been managing the situation by scaling their staffing operations in line with the reduction in income to ensure that their service can make it through this difficult period, and continue to provide important care and education for families that really need it.

Yesterday the government announced a relief package for the Early Childhood Education and Care sector. This package is aimed at ensuring as many early learning centres around Australia can remain open and provide care for children of families who are essential workers, and rely on their children being in care so that they can continue to keep this country running, and in turn provide care and medical response for those affected by this terrible situation.

To summarise the package, below are the main points of what has been implemented by the government:

- From 23rd March to 5th April, services are able to waive the gap fee for parents who have withdrawn their children from the service due to COVID-19 reasons.
- From Mon 6th April, services will no longer be able to charge families any fees for their service, and the current CCS system (subsidies) no longer exists, and will not be paid to services.
- From Mon 6th April, the government will make a weekly payment to services, based on 50% of their fee revenue, based on attendances submitted in the fortnight before March 2nd. (The 2 weeks will be averaged, then the payment will be 50% of this)
- This will be in place until the end of this financial year (28th June) at this stage.

WHAT THIS MEANS

I will break this down into two sections – the first being the period of 23rd March – 5th April, and the second being the 6th April onwards.

23RD MARCH – 5TH APRIL

If you had your children booked in and attending during this period, nothing changes. Fees are applicable as usual, and subsidies apply as paid for those sessions of care.

If you had withdrawn your children from care previous to Monday 23rd March due to COVID-19 reasons, we are now able to restore your bookings from this date, and you will not have to pay any gap fees. We will be contacting all of our parents who fall into this category, and offering this option so that you can restore your bookings and secure your child's place without having to pay any fees.

For families that kept their children enrolled during this period, but did not have their children attending and were paying some, or full fees, please contact us to discuss options. We really appreciate all families who did this for our service, as you are the reason that we were able to keep operating up until now, and lessen the impact on our employee engagement.

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**6TH APRIL ONWARDS**

From Monday 6th April, we are not able to charge any fees for either of our services (MSS or Waabiny).

THERE WILL BE NO FURTHER DEBITS TO YOUR ACCOUNT AFTER SUNDAY 5TH APRIL, AND YOU WILL NOT BE REQUIRED TO PAY IN ANY OTHER FORM FOR BOOKINGS PAST THIS DATE. ACCOUNT BALANCES PREVIOUS TO THIS DATE WILL STILL NEED TO BE FINALISED.

While this is a fantastic initiative for all of our parents and families, we do need to manage this carefully, as I will outline below:

- Due to the extraordinary drop in enrolments and bookings at our services over the past month, we have had to scale our staffing to suit the decrease in income and ensure that we can still stay open. This means that effectively we have a significantly reduced capacity for numbers of children attending our services, as staffing hours, and numbers, have decreased.
- We are effectively on a fixed income for at least the next 3 months, and will not be able to increase our staffing capacity, and thus child attendance capacity, past the limitations of this income.
- The fixed weekly payments from the government are essentially going to be half of our regular weekly income as at the end of February, and this will not change. This is traditionally the time of the year when services have their lowest numbers of bookings due to children transitioning to school, and lower bookings/enrolments from the summer holidays etc..
- New enrolments or increased attendances at our services will not increase this fixed payment, but will only increase the need for staffing and overhead costs.

WHAT WE WILL DO

- We will be prioritising attendance places for children currently booked and attending, and for those children of parents who are essential workers in the fields such as (but not limited to) medical, emergency services, police and armed forces, and education.
- We will be ensuring that we keep both of our services operational during this time, and keep providing the high standard of education and care that you are accustomed to.
- If you have made the decision to keep your child at home due to the COVID-19 situation, we will ensure that you can secure your child's places so that you can return them to care when we are able to return to a time of 'normal' operation (pre-March 2020), without the need to pay any fees.

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WHAT YOU NEED TO DO

Going forward, communication is going to be critical to ensuring that we can manage this situation effectively, and to ensure that we can provide education and care for your children in line with the laws and regulations that govern our sector. I will outline the steps that you need to take, based on all of the different circumstances that apply to your situation

IF YOUR CHILD IS CURRENTLY BOOKED AND ATTENDING THE SERVICE

You do not need to do anything. Your current bookings will remain, and your children will be able to attend as per normal. If you need to make adjustments to your bookings please contact us. If it is a request for an extra day/s, please continue to do this via your Xplor app, otherwise phone or email are the preferred forms of contact.

Please ensure that you give as much notice as possible for any changes, so we can ensure that we maintain correct educator-child ratios at all times. Please also understand that we may not be able to accommodate all booking requests, due to our reduced capacity for attendance.

If you make the decision to keep your child at home due to COVID-19, please contact us to advise. Your bookings will remain in the system, and your child's place will be secure, but we need to know if they will not be attending the service.

IF YOUR CHILD IS BOOKED, BUT NOT ATTENDING THE SERVICE

Please make sure that you have advised us that your child is not attending. It is important that we know which children are attending each day, so that we can ensure that we are meeting the minimum educator-child ratios as required by regulations. Your bookings will remain in the system, and your child's place will be secure.

IF YOU HAVE WITHDRAWN YOUR CHILD'S ENROLMENT

Please contact us as soon as you can. With the new system in place, you no longer need to pay anything to secure your child's place, and we want to ensure that this option is available to all of our parents and families of our services. Whether you would like your child to attend or not, this will give you peace of mind that when we get through this difficult time and we are able to resume 'normal' operations, that you won't have to worry about waiting for a place to become available for your preferred bookings.

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Below is a link to the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment website where you can find further information about the relief package:

<https://www.education.gov.au/childcare-FAQ>

We hope that the above explanation clears up any questions that you have about the new package announced by the government yesterday, and how this will affect our parents and families, and the way that we will operate our services in the near future. As always, if you have any questions, or would like to discuss any of the above, please do not hesitate to contact us at any time.

Sincerely

Jason, Erin and our Amazing Team

Montessori Stepping Stones & Waabiny OSHC

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