

A Parents Guide to Meeting with Candidates

By Kerry Phelan (parent activist)

I recently met with my local MP. I thought it was going to be really intimidating and scary but it was actually pretty OK. In fact I now feel as though I have done something really positive for both myself and my children.

Members of Parliament are supposed to represent US and be OUR voice in the decision-making processes in parliament. But, how do they know what we want unless we actually TELL them?

I told my MP my story.

I told my local Member how hard it was to find places in a childcare centre for my two young children. That I had visited over 20 childcare centres and that I wanted my children somewhere that focused on their wellbeing - not profits for shareholders. I explained that children's brains underwent crucial development until the age of 4 years and that quality childcare should be seen as an investment by the government - not an expense.

I told him I believed not-for-profit childcare was really important for the community and that it should be valued and supported by the government. That I was very, very worried about big business corporations using children in childcare as profit making commodities. I explained that not-for-profit childcare centres were terribly efficient with their resources and that profits could only be made by short cuts affecting the quality of care and the safety of children. Never the less childcare is very expensive and I related how the cost affected my family.

I told him that I valued the staff working in childcare and that I was concerned about them being so poorly paid. I also told him that I was worried about how community based childcare centres could be affected by the tax system.

My local MP listened to me for 45 minutes and then did something extraordinary. He made a phone call and arranged for a special Bill to go to Parliament that would give Community-Based not-for-profit childcare centres "Charity" status so that they won't be so affected by the tax system. This means that even more of the money they receive can directly benefit the staff and children.

My MP is Peter Costello, the Federal Treasurer, and my meeting with him really did achieve something!

Mind you, I didn't get much of a response to my concerns about the need to increase the Child Care Benefit (CCB) to make childcare more affordable, the need for more quality not-for-profit childcare, or my concerns about children being profits for shareholders! But maybe the next time, or the next or the next or however long it takes!

Because, now that I've had one meeting and realised how easy it is, I'm going to keep going back again and again and again.

If you want your story and concerns to be heard by your local MP or by the candidates for your electorate (especially with elections looming!) here are a few tips to help you.

If you don't know who your local Member of Parliament is, you can find out by contacting the:

Australian Electoral Commission: 13 2326 or www.aec.gov.au

Tell your local MP concerns you have about the availability and affordability of quality not-for-profit childcare.

- Write or fax a letter and/or send an email
- Meet in person

Put it in writing!

Writing to your MP is the easy way to get an issue that is important to you, noticed! You are a constituent - and that means that part of your MP's job, is to represent YOU and your views in Parliament. In order to represent your views, your MP needs to know what they are!

So what do you think? What is important to you?

If you are interested in helping to make quality not-for-profit childcare more accessible and affordable, or to make sure big business child care corporations care as much for the children and staff as they do about making a profit, then we need your help! This issue is an excellent topic to write to your MP about but remember: *you can write to your MP about any childcare issue that is important to you.*

Does writing to your MP really make a difference?

Absolutely! If your MP receives one letter demanding the government support the high quality childcare provided by not-for-profit providers and the need to make childcare more affordable by increasing the Child Care Benefit (CCB), she might think 'hmmmm that's a nice idea, but I don't think we have the money for such a scheme at the moment'. However, if she received 500 or 1000 letters, her response would be very different - more along the lines of 'goodness gracious, I better lobby for affordable not-for-profit childcare for my constituents, otherwise they might vote me out in the next election!'

Another great way to get your MP's attention is to try to involve all the families at your childcare centre. If you and the other parents think that your not-for-profit childcare centre needs to be supported by the government and be more accessible and affordable, then get everyone to write a letter to your MP in relation to this and send them off together. This is sure to brighten your MP's day - and of course help persuade them to adopt your position!

Top Three Tips

1. Always close your letter with the line 'I look forward to your reply' or your MP may not reply
2. You have a right to know what your MP thinks about any issue. When you write to an MP to tell them about an issue that's important to you, make sure you ask them to tell you what they think.
3. Politicians are very clever at saying a lot, but not actually agreeing to anything. Often their reply will say things like 'Many people have supported this very important issue' - this means absolutely nothing, because they haven't told you what they actually think! If you receive a response such as this, you should just see it as encouragement to write back to them and ask them for their specific view point.

Extra tips

Make the letter personal - use full names, tell them who you are, sign letters by hand. Keep it short - short sentences, no more details than necessary. Make it inviting to the eyes - attractive lay-out, left-aligned paragraphs, no more than five lines a paragraph and use bullet points to attract the eye. Explain - be careful not to assume knowledge and use easy to understand language. Use a friendly tone - offensive remarks will send the letter into the rubbish bin. Be assertive - friendly but firm - refer to the fact that as your MP their job is to represent you. Ask for activity - appeal to their readiness to help, give recommendations, tell them what you see as the next "step" and suggest ways of providing more information/calls/visits.

Meeting Your MP

Safety in Numbers

You can feel a bit more secure with a bit of support. Two or three parents together can have a powerful impact. Safety in numbers can help reduce any feelings of being intimidated. One person can also act as 'scribe' and write down all the MP's responses to your issues and concerns.

Get an appointment!

Once you know who your MP is and where their office is (from the Australian Electoral Office) you can ring up to make an appointment for a meeting.

I found it a bit tricky to actually get an appointment time. In fact it took over three months before I was given a date and time to meet with my MP Mr. Costello! Don't give up! Keep ringing every week or even every few days until you get a result. After three months of patiently and politely asking for an appointment I finally told the office staff that I was going to walk up and down the street in front of the office with my children in the pram decorated with signs stating they wanted to "meet with Pete" and that I would alert the local media to the event. I was given an appointment for two weeks later!

Be Prepared!

When you meet with your MP you will only have a very limited time to discuss your issues. Most meetings with MP's are under an hour. You need to be prepared. You don't want to waste time trying to remember what you wanted to say or going through a bundle of papers trying to find the right page to back up your story.

Prepare a page of dot points of all the issues you want to inform your MP about. Allocate who is going to talk about what and who is going to write down the MP's responses. Practice telling your story so that your issues and concerns are communicated in a coherent way that makes sense and will be understood by your MP. If you're worried you'll be nervous, rehearse with one of the other parents coming to the meeting. You can even practice in front of a mirror!

Imagine some responses your MP might make, (such as disagreeing with you, cutting you off, interrupting, offering to help, asking questions etc.) and practise how you can reply.

If you feel that you might need to "back-up" your issues with 'evidence', make sure you have copies of newspaper articles, photographs, letters etc. etc. available to take with you to the meeting.

Put all of the papers you are going to take with you in a folder that is divided into sections so that you can easily find the pages you want when you want them. Take along pens (that work), spare note paper and a camera!

Also, take along a written 'letter' detailing all the issues and concerns that you are going to discuss with your MP. You can give this to your Member at the conclusion of the meeting to reiterate what you have said.

MP's love to be acknowledged for some of the work they do, and will be that bit more helpful if you compliment them about something they have done. Even if you disagree with most of what the MP or their party have been doing, try and find something positive - even if it's something like attending a local charity function. Do a bit of research about your MP so you know what they have been up to. You could ask for a newsletter about electorate activities to be sent out to you when you first make an appointment.

Lastly, make sure you know where to go for the meeting and how long it takes to get there. Organise childcare for the children so that you and the MP can focus on your issues rather than the children entangled in the computer leads!

(However, if you are unable to organise childcare, see if you can get another parent to come along to supervise the children in the waiting room whilst you attend the meeting. You could also ask the MP's office staff if they could help with the children! This tactic can really demonstrate to MP's how difficult it is to get childcare and how necessary it is – there is nothing like real live babies and young children to drive a point home!)

Meeting Etiquette

To get your meeting off to a good start, make sure you dress appropriately. Smart office type clothing will show your MP that you are serious and can also increase trust. Ensure that you are a few minutes early. Be polite and friendly and introduce yourself to the reception staff, stating what childcare centre/organisation you are from and that you have a meeting with Mr./Mrs. Ms. Whoever.

You may find that you spend a bit of time in the waiting room before you finally get to meet your MP. MP's tend to be a bit like doctors – always running behind, so just keep your cool and be patient.

When you do get to meet your MP, offer your hand and give a firm, friendly handshake. Thank the MP for their time and for seeing you. Be polite and friendly. Compliment the MP on some positive action undertaken recently – this will show that you are well informed and not hostile. These actions can encourage your MP to be more receptive to your issues and concerns and to be more helpful in achieving your aims.

Keep the atmosphere positive by actively listening and showing that you are interested in their point of view. State your case clearly and precisely and detail the specific help you want. Keep the discussion on track and stick to the topics that you prepared. Dare to interrupt (politely!) and be confident when you ask and answer questions.

Do NOT shout, insult, threaten, abuse, be rude or aggressive. Do not be meek, mild, intimidated, bulldozed.

BE polite, friendly, firm, assertive, humorous, informed, patient, understanding, confident, successful, professional, helpful.

Stick to your allocated time and summarise discussions at the conclusion of the meeting. State clearly what has been covered, what has been agreed to and any action that is to be taken. Give the MP a prepared list of the your issues and concerns. Ask if you can have a photo taken with your MP that can be sent to the Local News Paper telling them about your meeting and the results achieved. *(MP's love to have local media coverage and this can often help them stay committed to the action that they promised – you can also use*

the media coverage to highlight the childcare issue of concern and how the MP offered/declined to help)

At the end of the meeting thank the MP again for their time and shake hands. Leave the office and meet at a nearby local coffee shop to go over the meeting. Do NOT stand outside the MP's office discussing the meeting. Save any chatter until you are out of hearing range.

Go over the meeting as soon as possible afterwards and check that all important points have been documented. Have a giggle and a nice cuppa and discuss what you need to do next and who is going to do what.

Follow up

Write a letter thanking the MP for the meeting and make sure you detail what was discussed during the meeting, what was agreed to and what action was decided.

Contact your local news paper and tell them about the meeting and the outcomes. If you managed to get a photo with your MP, tell them about it as it adds interest to the story and can increase the chances of it being published.

Make a phone call to your MP in 2-3 weeks to check on any progress and to see if the action promised has been undertaken.

Continue to remain in contact with your MP and to let them know about your childcare issues and concerns. Invite them to become an active participant in their community by becoming involved with your not-for-profit childcare centre. This will ensure that they develop a thorough understanding of the benefits of community-based childcare and will be able to advocate in parliament the importance of children being nurtured by their community and not used as profits for shareholders.