



Dear P01,

Re: Withdrawal of P01 P0P01 from the Preschool Program

This email sets out the circumstances that led to our decision to withdraw our child, P01 P01P01P0P01, from Blue Gum's preschool program at Dickson, including setting out two incidents involving the head of the Dickson campus, P01 P01, when we were present. We as P01's parents, P01 P01 and P01P01 believe the emotional and psychological safety of P01 was compromised at Blue Gum, and that his mental and emotional health and wellbeing suffered as a result. Consequently, we do not consider we should be required to pay Blue Gum the 10 weeks' notice period for withdrawing P01. We also request Blue Gum thoroughly investigate our complaint.

We decided to withdraw P01 because of his treatment by P01, and because of the adverse behavioural and emotional changes we observed in him since commencing Blue Gum. In our opinion, Blue Gum has failed in its duty of care to provide a safe and nurturing environment for P01.

Our notice to withdraw P01 was submitted last Monday, 22 March 2021, his last day of attendance. We felt his immediate withdrawal was the best option to safeguard his wellbeing. This was done first by a phone call from P01 (P01's mother) to the school. P01 spoke to the Office Manager, P01 P01, who advised her to put the notice in writing, which she did that afternoon. At the time, "family circumstances" was the cause of the withdrawal – we felt this term encapsulated the detrimental changes to P01's wellbeing without going into detail. We were very distressed by P01's emotional state and wanted to focus on helping him.

P01 is three years' old (P02). He had been attending Blue Gum since the start of the year – at three days a week (Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday). His last day at Blue Gum marked the completion of seven weeks and one day. This has given us sufficient time and opportunity to interact with his educators as parents, observe his relationships with them, and also observe any changes in his behaviour and emotional wellbeing.

We believe P01 was bullied and discriminated against by P01. There were two incidents where we were present. In both cases, P01 was "corrected" by humiliation and made to feel inadequate.

First incident week of 8 March 2021 (with P01 P01 P01's mother)

The first incident occurred in the week commencing 8 March 2021. P01 had been coming home saying Blue Gum was "creepy" and that one of the other children at preschool had been hitting him. The child named by P01 was known to him as they had attended the same childcare prior to starting Blue Gum, and we have observed that child hitting other children at childcare. Therefore, we had reason to believe that P01 was telling the truth. I, P01P01, approached P01, one of P01's educators, for advice. P01 referred me to P01, and we were able to speak, during the morning drop-off, with P01 by my side. I relayed to P01 the concerns P01 had been expressing. P01 asked me how I was teaching P01 to respond to the hitting. I replied I'd taught P01 to say "Stop!" to whoever was hitting him and that if the hitting continued for him to approach an educator. I was told by P01 that my approach was wrong, because the child who was hitting will not know what P01 was asking him to stop, that the word stop "meant everything and nothing", and that instead P01 should say something like "Stop [the action]. I don't like it. I don't feel safe."

P01 then informed me that P01 had also been going to other children with sticks and hitting them and interrupting their games, and that the other child might have hit P01 because he didn't like his game interrupted. She also informed me that P01 had trouble following the rules of the group, such as refusing to pack things away.

The final part of the conversation was when P01 turned to address P01 and asked him what he would do if another student hit him. When he repeated what I'd taught him, P01 admonished him loudly, telling him "No, that is wrong", but without telling him what the correct answer was. He stood there, bewildered, until I stepped in, put my arms around him, and explained that I had been talking to P01 about what to say when somebody hit him, and that she had told mummy that what I had taught him was wrong. I then told him what P01 said he should say.

To us, this is bullying. P01 already knew I had taught him to say something that she did not think was the right approach but asked him anyway. In our opinion, she had set him up to fail and then pointedly humiliated him. She did not attempt to teach him what she felt was the proper way as his educator – she had left it to me and failed to reassure him.

Second incident 22 March 2021 (with P01 P01, P01's father)

The second incident occurred on P01's last day at Blue Gum, Monday 22 March 2021. P01 was brought to school by me, P01. On that day, the Dickson campus was going on an excursion to the Hackett campus. It was a rainy day and I had brought P01 to school without a raincoat. Seeing that was the case, I provided P01 a small umbrella as a substitute. When P01 spotted P01 without a raincoat, I overheard her asking him where his was. P01 replied, "I don't have a raincoat, but I have an umbrella!" P01 replied that an umbrella was not good because it would not fit in the school bus and that he needed a raincoat. I asked P01 what the matter was because I saw P01 looking puzzled and concerned. She repeated the dialogue to me, to which I then offered my rain jacket to P01 to make him feel at ease, knowing that it was oversized and therefore unsuitable. Again, we believe P01 was made to feel humiliated and left to feel inadequate.

This little boy had a solution to a problem, and he was proud of it. While an umbrella may have been inappropriate item for a toddler because of safety or ease of use concerns, a toddler would not have understood this. P01 should have raised her concerns with me, especially as I was still on campus. Instead, P01's confidence was undermined, and he was made to feel inadequate. Further, I had stayed on the campus for a further five minutes to get P01 ready with his gum boots and to talk to P01 about P01 having his rain jacket just in case. During this time, I observed that there were other children without raincoats. However, I did not see P01 speaking to them or their parents about their lack of one. P01 was the only student she raised this issue with when I was there.

P01's behaviour since attending Blue Gum

The above interactions with the head of the Dickson campus have made us feel that P01 was potentially in an environment detrimental to his emotional and psychological wellbeing. Our concerns about his welfare were confirmed and compounded by changes in P01's behaviour in the last few weeks, including:

1. P01 began coming home with increasing wet changes of clothing, urine-saturated underwear and pants. When P01 started attending Blue Gum, P01 was toilet-trained, having "accidents" only when he was tired or when he was engrossed in an activity. When he started at Blue Gum, he'd usually come home with the clothing from one accident, which we thought was normal for him, and we expected them to decrease over time as he settled into his new environment and also matured in age. Against our expectations, the accidents began increasing in frequency, rising to two to three pairs of wet underwear and pants by week 6, and at one point in week 7 he came home with at least 4 wet changes of clothes. I, P01 remember that day well because when I first saw that many pairs of pants, I thought the educators may have run out of dry pants. These clothes were saturated with urine. P01 had almost certainly urinated on himself rather than going to the toilet. We were very alarmed by this, as we are aware that regression is a common sign of distress in children.
2. Around two weeks ago, Week 6 since he started at Blue Gum, we noticed P01 had become highly conscious of his urinating accidents and self-conscious that he is "naked" when changing his clothes. P01 would crouch down, pulling his top all the way to the ground so that it covered his bottom and penis. At times he may not crouch but would still pull his top down so that his penis and bottom are covered. Sometimes he would hide, not telling us where he had placed his wet clothes, getting his own dry clothes. Up until then P01 was comfortable with us helping him out of his wet clothes from his accidents. In our household we were conscious of not shaming him for accidents – we were confident that he will get there on his own. From about Week 7 I, P01 noticed he did not even want me to help him change, pleading with me to not take off his pants because "I don't want to be naked". When I insisted, he would often say "Ah, my pants, where are my pants?". He told me that "people" laughed at him at school when he had his wee accidents. He told me he had to go "naked" in front of others. On the night of 4 April, after P01 had an accident, he told P01 his peers at school would mock him during such changes and some spat at him.
3. P01 became increasingly distressed at the prospect of attending school and at being left behind at drop-offs. We had expected any anxiety of starting a new school to wane as he adjusted to his new environment. Instead, his anxiety mounted. In the beginning weeks, we thought it was normal that P01 had been reluctant to see his parents depart. He would need about 10-15 minutes, a book or two, before he could let us go. On several occasions, even after Week 6, he needed one of his more attuned educators, P01, to hold him in her arms while he burst into tears, struggling to escape and pleading "Mum, don't leave me!" This was not P01's behaviour at his former childcare centre, where he had attended once a week from February 2019 to December 2020 (excluding a period of about 16 weeks last year due to COVID-19). There, P01 had been proud to show us where to put his bag, how to put his lunch in the fridge, and where to place his drink bottle, indicating to us he was ready and willing to spend his day there. P01's positive social and emotional development at his former childcare centre is recorded in his bi-yearly assessments.
4. Similarly, from about Week 5 onwards, P01 would be highly emotional following pick up from Blue Gum. For example, P01 normally enjoys going to the shops for a snack, and when P01 would pick him up in the afternoon. P01 would often take him to the Dickson shops to grab some food for dinner and treat P01 to a snack. Around Week 5, after school he noticed that P01 would often cry with the slightest provocation – he would be inconsolable because he didn't like, for example, a certain parking spot. P01 had lost interest in visiting the shops, not even tempted by the thought of a snack, and nothing seemed to ease his distress. Upon arrival at home, he would continue

being teary, and not sit to watch television, often complaining the cartoons he used to watch were too scary or they weren't the ones he wanted to watch. He would also become easily frustrated and distressed when playing with toys.

5. At home and unprompted, from about Week 3, P01 began telling us that he didn't like Blue Gum, describing it in unflattering terms, such as "Blue Gum is creepy" and "Blue Gum is disgusting".

Rationale for withdrawal from Blue Gum

The above events convinced us P01's personal growth will be stunted if he continued at Blue Gum. His emotional and psychological safety was being compromised. Reaching this conclusion was highly distressing and we felt the only way to protect our son was to withdraw him immediately from his vulnerable situation. His self-esteem, his confidence and his emotional and psychological wellbeing was rapidly deteriorating. We have no confidence in Blue Gum to explore other options, such as switching of classrooms or campuses. We relied on Blue Gum to take care of P01 while we both are at work. We did not have back-up care arrangements for P01 when we withdrew him. We have had to make big adjustments to our working and family lives to take care of P01 ourselves and meet our work commitments while we secured other care arrangements. We are very disappointed with Blue Gum. We had been so excited about P01 beginning his schooling here. We attended an open day last year, and have actively participated in Blue Gum activities such as parent night to meet all his educators and the working bee. In our opinion, we feel that P01's mental health and wellbeing were compromised at Blue Gum. Therefore, we feel it is inappropriate for us to be required to pay the requested 10 weeks' notice period for withdrawing P01 given the decision to take him out of Blue Gum was out of necessity to protect his mental and emotional health and wellbeing. Since his withdrawal, we have sought advice from our GP who has referred P01 to the ACT Government's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. We have also sought advice from a counsellor specialising in child welfare and intend to continue using this service.

In the past week since we have pulled him out of Blue Gum, his toilet accidents decreased significantly. For example, on 30 March (eight days after last attending Blue Gum), he did not have an accident, nor did he the following day, 31 March. Not once since leaving has he had toileting accidents numbering two, three or four or more as had become customary in Blue Gum in the last weeks he was there. Seeing this, and witnessing our son becoming more relaxed and less emotional, has given us the validation that we made the right decision in taking him out.

In sum, we are seeking the waiving of the ten weeks' notice period as the withdrawal of P01 was to protect his mental and emotional wellbeing. We are also seeking Blue Gum's response to how it will investigate and address the issues and concerns we have raised in terms of P01's treatment at Blue Gum.

We have contacted both the ACT Human Rights Commission and the ACT Regulatory Authority, Children's Education and Care Assurance (CECA), in relation to our concerns. CECA has been copied to this email.

We will be happy to provide further information and to participate in a discussion. Should you wish to make an appointment, please contact P01 on P03 or P01 on P03.

Yours sincerely,

P01 and P01, P01