



# No school for my mokos when the cupboards are bare

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A grandmother expresses the anguish she feels on a daily basis witnessing her children struggle to put food on the table for her mokopuna. She and her husband do what they can, but they aren't exactly flush living on a pension. Kaisie\* wishes to keep her identity private to protect the people in her story.

I have six mokopuna, who are the children of two of my children. Three of my mokos live with their mother, our daughter (who is a sole mum) and the other three, our son's children, live with both their parents. Our daughter has been on the benefit for around four years now, while our son and his family had been getting it for his family for around a year.

My husband and I were devastated when our children revealed to us that both sets of families have, through desperation and shame, kept the kids out of school on the days that there was no food in the cupboards to make a lunch for them to take to school. The last occurrence was only recently, when my daughter had nothing left to feed her children until her benefit payment came through on a Tuesday evening, she was too ashamed and worried for her children's hunger at school that she kept them home on the Monday and

Tuesday. When the benefit came in at around 7:30pm on the Tuesday, our daughter packed the kids up and went shopping for food, including dinner for that night.

Our daughter struggles to make the weekly repayments for her debts. Occasionally her family has had weeks where there wasn't enough money to cover an automatic payment. This meant the bank charged her a fee, leaving them short for money for their food. Her life has become a groundhog day of painstakingly sorting out the priorities at the checkout and leaving necessities - the nutritious food - behind. Once, she ran out of the grocery store, humiliated, and with hungry children, leaving all the groceries at the counter because there was not enough money in her bank account to cover them. Normally parents would be able to sort through and get the things they needed, but she was just too stressed.

My heart breaks for our mokopuna and our daughter who is doing the best she can with the little she has, but every day she is in this situation it gets a bit harder. While she once had all the motivation in the world to get her life back on track after her relationship ended, now the depression and anxiety she suffers through struggling on her budget has become so deep it controls her life. Once a fabulous cook who regularly baked with two toddlers on the bench beside her, most days now she cannot manage the energy, confidence and inclination to cook basic food, out of the ingredients that she can muster.

My husband Patrick\* and I have had our own time on a benefit when our five kids were little and Patrick was made redundant, so we have an understanding of what it is our daughter is going through. We were lucky, we had each other for support. I have seen that it is so much harder for sole parents especially. Not to mention the costs of living, housing and expectations of society to do everything well.

Several of our mokos are overweight and one is obese which affects his self esteem deeply. His weight problem is undoubtedly due to the lack of good nutrition as their diet largely consists of 'fillers' such as instant noodles and cheap white bread. All of our mokos have a preoccupation with food. When they visit us, they are clearly looking forward to the good food they will have. The first thing they want to know is what will be for tea, followed shortly thereafter by "what will we have for breakfast, Taua?" I think it is obsessive the way they talk and think about food.

Aside from their daily struggles with a lack of decent food, our mokos don't get to participate in activities outside of school, there simply isn't the money. That means no physical activities to help them burn off their energy, socialise within their community and to give them something to look forward to.

Through all this, our relationship with our daughter has suffered. Her confidence in herself and her ability as a mother and a person is very low, and it has affected her interactions with her wider family. She feels dependent upon us yet at the same time she is fearful of judgement. It's understandable - we do have great concerns - and it's really hard to be able to help her in the way that she needs help. What she really wants is a good job, and to be able to provide well for her family, independently. But the daily stress of life over the past four years has reduced her capacity enormously, and her health. A lack of money to visit a doctor in a timely way when she was ill led to our daughter ending up in hospital with serious kidney infections. We don't understand why her community services card is not able to cover the cost of be used to help with costs such as visiting a doctor. Being on her own, too, there's no-one around to help out with the kids so she can rest up and recover, which means she puts off seeing to her own health needs. Our hearts are breaking for our daughter and our mokopuna, and we really don't know what to do.

What we would like to see happen through Government action is for the benefit payments to be made higher, so it allows our daughter and her children to have good health. Better provision to access the kind of support that she and others in her situation need to manage their budgets and to get on with life in a positive way, such as through a mentoring programme. We'd like to know that all Work and Income case workers were assessed for their ability to handle people gently and empathetically, and who go to lengths to ensure no child goes hungry. They should be understanding and sympathetic to different cultural needs.

Patrick and I came up with the idea for a support programme, where older retired people with life experience and time spare are buddied up with low-income families who might benefit from practical support, to help them with practical needs, be it parenting support, cooking, gardening or cleaning. We call it the "good fairy club". There are so many programmes for volunteers that spend their time looking out for elderly people, why not have an agency for supporting young parents - to support them to see a way forward, to get ahead and to succeed, thereby ensuring their children do too?

We are acutely aware that not everyone has an extended family to help out on a daily basis, and even those that do may need more support than they probably have access to. People living with poverty aren't hopeless cases, nor should they be blamed for their situation - it can so easily happen to anyone, like the way it happened to our girl. She never set out to be in the situation that she now finds herself. Life was once bright and buzzy for her and her three children.

The bigger picture, we think, needs to have factored in a village approach where all families in need are included. They are all missing out on it, and it seems to us there needs to be a big boost to help them get by. We believe with careful thought out changes where

living as a beneficiary with dependent childrenants has been the actual focus, we can do right for all our whānau.

\*Names have been changed to protect the identity of people in the article.