

Pre-Budget Submission: 2023-2024

Brave Foundation respectfully acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which our organisation is located and where we deliver our support programs across Australia. We pay our respects to their ancestors and Elders, past, present and emerging.

Brave's work also brings us into daily contact with many people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. We are committed to respecting the culture and heritage of each person we encounter, both inside and outside our organisation.

The case for supporting young parents and their children

In the past decade approximately 80,000 new Australian mothers were aged 19 years or youngerⁱ. Whilst the overall trend for adolescent births has declined nationally, there are parts of Australia, predominantly in rural and regional areas where birth rates to teen mothers have increasedⁱⁱ.

The proportion of Indigenous teenage mothers (aged under 20) has also been falling over time, from 20 per cent in 2010 to 11 per cent in 2020. However, this cohort remains significantly larger than the national comparison of 1.8 per cent of mothers who gave birth aged under 20ⁱⁱⁱ.

Young mothers are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Australian society and the relative disadvantage has increased over time. They are more likely to be reliant on income support payments, have lower levels of education and, by the time they reach their 30s, are less likely to be partnered than women who were not young mothers.^{iv}.

Since 2015, the Department of Social Services (DSS) has invested in the development of an actuarial model of the Australian population that documents the total lifetime costs (in terms of the social security system) for different segments of the Australian population.

The baseline valuation report from 2015^v provides total average lifetime costs for different population segments to inform evidence-based decisions regarding policy settings and potential interventions for these groups.

As of 30 June 2015, 432,000 Parenting Payment recipients had an average lifetime cost of **\$441,000** (\$324,000 non-age pension portion and \$118,000 age pension portion). The model found that those who entered the system as *young parents* between the ages of 14 and 18 during 2015 had an average lifetime cost of **\$540,000**.

Further analysis of this group was undertaken in the 2016 valuation report^{vi}, noting that the model is refined and enhanced each year. The analysis found an average lifetime cost of **\$648,000** for this group and an expectation that 79 per cent would still be receiving income support in 10 years' time and 57 per cent in 20 years' time.

Often these young Australians are single parents with little or no family support – many with lived experience of intergenerational trauma, family violence, substance addiction, homelessness and the child protection system as a child themselves. They already face hardship, inequitable challenges and stigmatisation and thus through their young parenting journey should be provided with the resources to support them and their children to thrive. In the absence of such support, the likelihood is that the behaviours and symptoms of their trauma survival is passed onto their children who may then continue to pass on the intergenerational trauma.

Given the particular needs and developmental changes of this group of parents, support services need to be designed and delivered to meet their needs. They are likely to have different and more entrenched barriers to work and/or study as well as the challenges of raising a child^{viii}.

The First 1000 days – Strong Foundations Report^{ix} highlights that the timing of interventions is key to improving child outcomes and provides the economic case for investment in targeted, *strength based*

early intervention strategies. Throughout their lifespan, children from all contexts will have better outcomes overall if, from the time of their conception to their second birthday, they have been provided with:

- a carer/parent with an understanding of the child's everyday needs and development milestones
- warm and loving relationships
- a sense of safety and security at home and in the community
- time to play and opportunities to be outside
- a healthy and safe environment
- healthy and nutritious food.

About Brave Foundation

Brave Foundation (Brave) equips pregnant and parenting young people with resources, referral, and education opportunities to facilitate happy, healthy, and skilled families. Our Vision is to see future generations thrive and we do this by unlocking the boundless potential of young parents.

Founded, designed, and led by women with diverse lived experience, Brave is Australia's first national not-for-profit dedicated to assisting pregnant and parenting young people.

Established in 2009, Brave's innovative mentor program Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) was initially funded in 2018 under the Try, Test and Learn (TTL) Fund and is currently funded until 30 June 2024 by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Office for Women). We are also supported by the Tasmanian Government Department of Premier and Cabinet and philanthropic organisations.

About Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT)

Brave's SEPT program is an innovative mentor program and Pathway Plan framework, co-designed with young parents and underpinned by the evidence based First 1000 Days model that supports early years of life. Priority cohorts are:

- Parents aged under 25 who began parenting at 19 years or under
- First Nations and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse parents aged under 25 who began parenting at 21 years or under
- Parents aged under 25 living with disability
- Parents aged under 25 living in rural, regional or remote locations.

The program is available to participants for twelve months, however it can be reduced or extended depending on the parent's personal circumstances. The personalised program matches a pregnant or parenting young person with a SEPT Mentor working from local hub sites, community organisations or via outreach across most Australian States and Territories. There are 15 Mentors across Australia with a physical presence in each jurisdiction except for ACT and South Australia. Three Virtual Mentors are also available for rural and remote participants and those experiencing isolation due to mental health or other complexities.

Our Mentors are a professional workforce, coming from disciplines such as education, early childhood, maternal and child health, youth work, community services and social work. SEPT deliberately uses the term ‘mentor’, a term chosen based on consultation with young parents. Brave requires all Mentors to complete training in family violence, child protection, sexual assault referrals, self-care, professional boundaries, culture, and working with those that have experienced or are experiencing trauma.

With carefully managed caseloads, SEPT Mentors work intensively with young parents to build and develop goals and pathway plans, and, importantly to link the parent with support and resources that will help them overcome barriers and achieve their goals. Our Mentors walk alongside their participants throughout the pathway program – from referrals and first contact, to setting goals and working to achieve them, to celebration of their achievements and graduation from the program.

Our Mentors work together with the pregnant or parenting young person on what is important to them, including (but not limited to):

- educational and workforce participation
- health and wellbeing
- financial or housing assistance programs
- everyday infant care
- transport.

Brave also partners with and promotes existing pregnancy and parenting support services and educational opportunities.

Brave’s impact

Since 2018, we have supported over 1200 pregnant and parenting teens, including young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents.

Our program has achieved great success by viewing the holistic needs of our participants as they pursue their education and workforce participation goals and address financial, housing, mental health and wellbeing, and family and domestic violence challenges. Ninety-five per cent of participants complete the program and 2 or more specific goals.

Brave’s Mentors are place-based, and a core part of their role is knowing and connecting with local community. In 2022, Brave made 900 referrals to community services. In doing so, we ensure that existing services are accessed – enhancing support rather than duplicating. An example of this is increased participant attendance and connection with maternal and child health services that improves confidence in parenting and wellbeing outcomes. Just as important, by connecting with Brave, 500 children were also positively impacted in 2022. Outcomes included early intervention with developmental concerns and referrals to appropriate support in addition to enrolment in early learning organisations.

More information about Brave’s impact can be found in the attached Impact Report 2022.

Engagement with Young Parents to Inform Policy and Programs

In addition to our SEPT program, Brave also has established systems that could facilitate the inclusion of young parents lived experience into any future policy or program development.

These include our SEED Advisory Council and Lived Experience Reference Group which could potentially provide an avenue for testing new approaches.

We have been invited to the National Early Years Summit in February which will guide the development the Albanese government's election commitment for an Early Years Strategy. A Brave participant and Mentor have also been requested to share their lived experiences as a part of the Summit.

Further to this we have also responded to the Work and Care Inquiry, Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services (including presenting at a related public hearing) and participated in an Office for Women's roundtable to information the development of the *National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality* to share the specific needs of young parents.

We welcome the opportunity to continue to share the lived experience of young parents to inform national policy and programs.

Recommendations

To date, Brave has received two Federal Government funding grants. In 2018, Brave received a three-year funding agreement under the Department of Social Services *Try, Test Learn (TTL) Fund*, which identified young parents as a priority cohort requiring new and innovative solutions to welfare dependence.

More recently in 2021, Brave was awarded another three-year grant from Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet's Office for Women's *Women's Leadership Development Program*. Brave welcomes the Federal Government support received however long-term sustainable funding is required to provide ongoing support for the SEPT program and further extended its reach and impact.

At present, an Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services is underway. At the request of the Hon Tony Burke, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, the Committee is also specifically reviewing the construct and impact of ParentsNext. This also includes the consideration of other relevant programs to support parents.

We believe that Brave provides an alternative and complementary program with a focus to support young parents in particular. Through the review, **there is an opportunity to further extend the SEPT program reach and enhance referral pathways over the next financial year and beyond as ParentsNext potentially transitions to alternative programs.**

While SEPT and ParentsNext share some common elements, the SEPT program is holistic and broader than ParentsNext. A key distinction between the programs is that participation in SEPT is *voluntary* with participants able to self-refer or be referred to the program by family, friends or professionals. The voluntary nature of the program enables a development of trust and for the young person to have a

greater agency and accountability in their choices. This is particularly beneficial when parents do not meet ParentsNext program and/or payment age requirements and allows them to access additional support.

An independent evaluation of SEPT found that the early support given to SEPT participants around pathway plans is likely to place them in a better position to achieve their education and employment goals, during their involvement in SEPT or after they move on to ParentsNext. The report also found that the broader remit of SEPT compared to ParentsNext encourages referrals from ParentsNext^x

Additionally, the SEPT program fills the gap between the time when a young person discovers they are pregnant and the time they are required to develop a participation plan and possibly enter the ParentsNext program when their child turns nine months old^{xi}. In the current iteration of ParentsNext, tens of thousands of young parents are potentially missing out on valuable support that would bring immediate benefit but also contribute to breaking cycles of disadvantage for future generations.

Should ParentsNext continue, or prepare for transition over the next year, **Brave recommends that a consistent national referral process is introduced and that all young parents are referred to the SEPT program for additional wrap-around support for parents and their children.**

In order to achieve this, further funding would be required to meet this increased demand. At present, Brave's capacity to respond to referrals is limited to current resources however with additional financial support, the service could be scaled up with replicant models and capacity building initiatives included to expand reach and impact.

*Based on current costs associated with delivery of Brave's SEPT program, investment of approximately **\$10,000** per participant has the potential to save approximately **\$648,000** of the average lifetime cost for young parents.*

In addition, we also request that consideration is given to expanding the age limits for accessing Parenting Payments and inclusion of the pregnancy period.

With the ability to study or gain employment potentially limited by pregnancy, young people often rely on other payment support such as Youth Allowance. However, this is also limited with availability restricted to those 16 years or older, who are studying, looking for fulltime work or completing an apprenticeship. This leaves particularly young parents under the age of 16 without access to financial support. With Brave participants at times being young as 13 years old, this lack of access to critical support during pregnancy and prior to eligibility to programs such as ParentsNext further disadvantages vulnerable young parents.

Brave also recommends further investment and extension of school support programs to facilitate the completion of high school education.

Whilst Brave Mentors can support participants still at school age to complete their education, supportive environments and policies are also needed.

The Australian education system has some programs that provide alternative pathways for pregnant and parenting young people to remain in school and complete their education. We welcome this setting support for young people.

Contact Details

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References

ⁱ Births, 2011 to 2021, Australian Bureau of Statistics

ⁱⁱ https://www.fpnsw.org.au/sites/default/files/assets/Report_Adolescent-Fertility-in-New-South-Wales-Australia-2011-2020.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ [Australia's mothers and babies, Maternal age - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au/australias-mothers-and-babies/maternal-age)

^{iv} Bradbury, B. (2006). Disadvantage among Australian young mothers. *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, 9(2), 147-171.; Hoffmann, H., & Vidal, S. (2017). Supporting teen families: an assessment of youth childbearing in Australia and early interventions to improve education outcomes of young parents. ARC Centre for Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course.

^v [Valuation Report, 30 June 2015: Baseline Valuation \(dss.gov.au\)](https://www.dss.gov.au/valuation-report-30-june-2015-baseline-valuation)

^{vi} [Valuation Report, 30 June 2015: Baseline Valuation \(dss.gov.au\)](https://www.dss.gov.au/valuation-report-30-june-2015-baseline-valuation)

^{vii} [Valuation Report, 30 June 2016 Valuation \(dss.gov.au\)](https://www.dss.gov.au/valuation-report-30-june-2016-valuation)

^{viii} Prescott, J, Hanley, T & Gomez, K.U. (2019). Why do young people use online forums for mental health and counselling support. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, Vol 47, No.3, pp 317-32

^{ix} <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/childrens-rights/publications/childrens-rights-report-2017>

^x https://www.utas.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1366684/FinalReport-IndependentEvaluationSEPT-June2020-final.pdf

^{xi} SEPT Activity Work Plan, Nov 2018