

Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services: ParentsNext Recommendations

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 and present.

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.

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 by the Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Office for Women), the Tasmanian Government Department of Premier and Cabinet, and philanthropic organisations.

About SEED

The Social Economic Empowerment Department (SEED), a new division of Brave, brings together government, philanthropy, the not-for-profit sector and academia with the aim of creating collaboration opportunities to inform holistic and enduring policy development for Australian families, particularly in the first 1000 days.

The early work of SEED has involved connecting with a wide range of stakeholders, setting up a Lived Experience Reference Group and establishing an Advisory Council, drawing on expertise from relevant sectors. A Policy Round Table of senior public servants from across government has also been established. This group will be key to progressing policy proposals.

SEED is undertaking analysis to identify where the cost burden for young parents sits in comparison to the 'average' parent. The work will identify the quantum of those costs with a view to being able to identify reduction in costs from successful programs of support (an investment lens) and put forward the case for using those savings in the longer-term to fund programs of support in the shorter-term.

Response to Inquiry

The focus of this response is to provide commentary and recommendations directly related to the role of ParentsNext in providing early intervention services to parents and carers of young children as part of the employment services system.

We acknowledge the terms of reference as the following:

- a) The implementation, performance and appropriateness of Workforce Australia Employment Services;
- b) the extent to which Workforce Australia Employment Services delivers services in a way that is fair, leaves no one behind, respects individuals' diverse needs, and supports job seekers into secure work, in particular; its support for long term unemployed and young people; and
- c) other matters in relation to Workforce Australia Employment Services.

Additionally, we note the following specific areas of interest relating to ParentsNext:

- Policy objectives
- Eligibility and compulsory participation requirements
- Impact on women's economic equality and workforce participation
- Efficacy in addressing structural and cultural barriers to accessing family support, education and employment
- Funding and service delivery arrangements.

This submission will focus primarily on how ParentsNext impacts young parents and their children in addition to demonstrating how Brave's voluntary SEPT Program could be considered as an alternative or complementary program.

The submission also wishes to draw attention to the newly established SEED Advisory Council and Lived Experience Reference Group which could potentially provide an avenue for testing new approaches.

Impact on young parents and their children

In the past decade almost 80,000 new Australian mothers were aged 20 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.

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.ⁱⁱⁱ

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 this along the family line as 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^{iv}.

ParentsNext is a pre-employment program that is compulsory for some parents and carers. Parents and carers aged under 22 are required to take part in ParentsNext if:

- they have not completed Year 12 or equivalent
- are receiving Parenting Payment
- have not worked in the last six months
- have a child aged nine months to six years.

Parents and carers aged 22 years or over are required to take part in ParentsNext if:

- they have not completed Year 12 or equivalent
- they have been receiving income support (e.g., Parenting Payment) for at least two years.

Taking part in ParentsNext is not required for those who are studying or are on leave from work and have a job to return to. Attendance is also not compulsory for people under 15 years of age.

The program is punitive and prescriptive in its approach with specific tasks such as attending appointments, agreeing to a Participation Plan and reporting activities required in order to receive a Parenting Payment. The negative impact of compulsory participation is widely recognised including in the recent ParentsNext: examination of Social Security (Parenting payment participation requirements - class of persons) Instrument 2021^v. This report specifically reviewed the human rights implications of Parenting Payment requirements with recommendations including that:

- Participation be voluntary
- If participation remained compulsory:
 - a class of persons are not prescribed
 - individual circumstances were assessed in the best interest of any child

- any payment reductions or cancellations would not result in the parent or any children being unable to meet their basic needs; and
- further consultation be undertaken with Indigenous-led organisations and affected communities

Whilst Brave Foundation welcomes these recommendations, we wish to emphasise the silence on the implications for young parents who are at greater risk of long-term welfare dependency.

Young parents are likely to be significantly disadvantaged if their payments are suspended, given they are less likely than other parents to have cash reserves to pay for their basic needs and those of their children. Suspension of payments may compromise their rights to an adequate standard of living and have a prolonged impact. Whilst Brave is aware that the number of payment suspensions has decreased with programmatic changes, this remains an issue for those families where payments have been suspended.

It could be argued that protecting the rights of the child conflicts with the demands of the ParentsNext program. Families are compelled to participate in the program or risk having their payments suspended, thereby compromising their capacity to provide adequately for their children.

Case Study

Jen is 18, has a new baby and has set goals to have her older child returned to her care (currently with a relative), finish Year 12 and, long term, to provide her children with a safe and loving home. Our Mentor reported that Jen was at her wits end with Child Safety and ready to give up on working towards getting her child back in her care.

Brave helped this participant advocate for herself and her child and supported Jen to learn how to self-regulate so she could sit through a full meeting with all parties. Jen now can participate in very intense and long meetings, giving input and remaining calm.

Jen recently remarked that Brave has saved her life and she is so thankful that Brave entered her life when we did. Jen is regularly attending contact sessions with her older child and is on track to return to full care. She is also attending groups at the Child and Family Learning Centre for social and parenting support.

The First 1000 days – Strong Foundations Report^{vi} 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 in all areas if from the time of their conception to their second birthday they have been provided with the following:

- 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.

The compulsory participation of ParentsNext is arguably more difficult for young parents than others, given their greater likelihood of single parenting, lower rates of school completion, workforce participation and higher rates of poverty.

Further to this, it should be noted that in many circumstances ParentsNext and associated Parenting Payments are only available once a child is born, leaving vulnerable young parents without many options to support themselves during their pregnancy.

With the ability to study or gain employment potentially limited by pregnancy, young people often rely on other payment support such as Youth Allowance. This however is also limited for pregnant young people with availability restricted to those 16 years or older, who are studying, looking for fulltime work or completing an apprenticeship. Further to this, JobSeeker Payments are only available to young Australians over the age of 22. 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 ParentsNext further disadvantages vulnerable young parents.

We welcome the recent announcement of time extension for Parental Leave Pay from 18 weeks to 26 weeks (subject to legislation passing) as it philosophically supports caregiving responsibilities being a priority for parents. However, Paid Parental Leave is restricted to those that are employed, have earned an income in the previous 12 months and taken steps to register any children's birth.

Having access to proof of identity documents, such as a birth certificate (for the parent themselves), Medicare card and so on, can present a significant barrier for young parents in applying for a birth certificate for their child as well as for applying for payments through Services Australia. Brave has several examples of young parents whose own births were not registered. Thus, this last request whilst appearing straight forward to some is not for others, when they themselves do not formally exist.

We would like to note the importance of messaging around caregiving in the early stages of a child's life and strongly recommend that policy settings should be consistent. The proposed extension of Paid Parental Leave to 26 weeks reinforces the importance of close parental caring for a child in the early months. It is important that this choice is not dismissed as an option for a young parent.

Case Study

In Tasmania's Northwest, our Mentor regularly locates herself in the common areas of the Child and Family Centre. There is a drop in, no referral approach and all the services are free. Our Mentor is connected with Kelly, a midwife with CU@Home, who also drops in there.

Kelly advised our Mentor that she feels so relieved that she can refer her young mums to Brave once she has completed her program with them. Kelly reported that it is so nice to have a service she can trust and rely on to keep supporting the young mums once her time finishes and she knows that Brave will support those mums to flourish, grow further confidence in themselves as both young adults and mothers, and get the support they need to pursue employment and/or training for their futures.

The Australian education system has some programs such as Canberra Cares^{vii} and St Philip's Christian College Young Parents School^{viii} that provide alternative pathways for expectant and parenting young people to remain in and complete their high school education. Brave welcomes these programs and recommends further investment and extension of similar programs to facilitate the long-term positive impact these can have on young people.

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. Virtual mentors are also available for rural and remote participants and those experiencing isolation due to mental health or other complexities.

Case Study

A new mum, Tanika, was living in a crowded house with a friend and her family. She wanted financial stability, to be a great parent to her baby, study, get a job and find independent housing. But she felt judged as a young parent and stopped going to child health appointments.

After starting the SEPT Program, Tanika met her Mentor at the local child and parent centre where she felt comfortable and welcomed. She now regularly visits the child and parent centre, attends playgroups with her son and is linked in with the child health nurse. Tanika worked with her mentor to set financial goals, budget and save, and is on track to purchase her own home. She is also employed and studying at a childcare centre in a traineeship. Tanika now radiates with confidence and has hope for a bright future.

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. Interestingly, Brave has found that the mentor role requires a set of skills and capabilities not necessarily found in those with a social work background given social workers tend to work through a crisis management lens.

Job titles like *Mentor*, *Coach*, *Navigator*, and *Linker* are becoming more prevalent in this domain. These terms aim to describe the holistic nature of the work that Brave Mentors and other community service

professionals undertake in helping clients to access the services and support that they need. Importantly, these types of roles provide a way to operationalise the relational, client-centred, flexible support which evidence shows is more effective^{ix}.

Arguably, the role of Navigator or Linker is not yet recognised within the community sector nor fully understood or valued by Government. With this in mind, Brave is currently undertaking a project to establish a national Navigators Network for professionals in these types of roles. The Network seeks to bring greater visibility to this growing workforce and to the high levels of professional practice that underpin this work. Given the alignment of Navigators with ParentsNext Providers, we welcome the opportunity to share learnings from this project with Government.

With deliberately 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.

Since 2018, we have supported over 1000 expecting and parenting teens, including young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents. Our program has achieved great success by viewing the holistic needs of young parents - our participants have pursued their education and workforce participation goals, addressing financial, housing, mental health and wellbeing, and family and domestic violence challenges. In doing so, we have noted increased participant attendance and connection with maternal and child health services and enhanced their overall confidence in parenting.

Case Study

Kelly was 18 and pregnant with her first child when she started the Supporting Expecting & Parenting Teens (SEPT) Program. In care since the age of two, she had no stable accommodation, education or strong social connections. Homeless, she was facing the prospect of having her baby in care.

Kelly met regularly with her Mentor to set goals and was linked into Moort Boodjari Mia, to receive culturally safe, secure and confidential pregnancy services. She now has stable accommodation, is the primary carer of her daughter, participates in parenting programs, has financial stability and is on track to enrol in TAFE to pursue her dream of working with animals.

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.

Based on our experience, ParentsNext providers view SEPT as satisfying compliance requirements for ParentsNext and have sought to refer young parents into SEPT to meet obligations. This is particularly beneficial when parents do not meet ParentsNext program and/or payment age requirements and allows them to access additional support required.

The SEPT program also fills the gap between the time when a young person discovers they are expecting and the time they are required to develop a participation plan and possibly enter the ParentsNext program when their child turns nine months old^x.

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 voluntary nature of SEPT and intensive support from Mentors sets participants up to engage with the compliance requirements of ParentsNext. The report also found that the broader remit of SEPT compared to ParentsNext encourages referrals from ParentsNext^{xi} It should however be noted that there is not always such a smooth experience with examples of lack of communication and response to requests from ParentsNext providers. Should ParentsNext continue, Brave welcomes the opportunity to extend the partnership, its reach and impact to help future generations thrive.

Recommendations

- Support, particularly in the early stages, **needs to be voluntary** to help **build the confidence** of the parent.
- If a compulsory component of ParentsNext continues, requirements relating to younger ages should be removed.
- Mentors/ case workers/ linkers need **low caseloads** and need to have the **appropriate background and training**.
- Support programs need to be **branded as supportive**, as **‘an investment in your (and your children’s) future’** rather than with a compliance approach.
- Parenting payments **access age should be lower** and include the pregnancy period.
- Any changes considered to ParentsNext should be **informed by the lived experience** of young parents.
- **Formal, consistent referral pathways** from ParentsNext to the Brave SEPT program should be established.
- **Long-term sustainable resourcing** be provided by the Federal Government to support the SEPT program extended reach and impact.
- There is no one size fits all – support needs to be **individualised** and aimed at the **wellbeing** of parent/s and children.

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 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.

^{iv} 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

^v https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Human_Rights/ParentsNext/Report

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

^{vii} https://www.canberrac.act.edu.au/information/programs/cc_cares

^{viii} <https://www.spcc.nsw.edu.au/young-parents-school>

^{ix} <https://www.paulramsayfoundation.org.au/news-resources/understanding-linkers-new-role-emerges-to-help-people-navigate-complex-social-services-system>

^x SEPT Activity Work Plan, Nov 2018

^{xi} https://www.utas.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1366684/FinalReport-IndependentEvaluationSEPT-June2020-final.pdf