



South Australia Youth Action Plan 2023-26

Brave Foundation submission

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Brave Foundation (Brave) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to South Australia's Youth Action Plan 2023-26. This submission provides evidence, commentary and recommendations focused primarily on the importance of supporting young South Australian parents to flourish.

We acknowledge the South Australian Government's strength-based approach to this Youth Action Plan and investment to ensure the plan is informed by young people and stakeholder organisations. This submission wishes to draw attention to Brave's experience in amplifying the voices of young parents with lived experience Commonwealth policies including the National Early Years Strategy, National Youth Engagement Strategy and design of a new voluntary parent support program (former ParentsNext program).

About Brave Foundation

Brave equips expecting 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 mentoring 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

Brave's Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) program is an innovative mentoring program and Pathway Plan framework, co-designed with young parents and underpinned by evidence on the importance of the First 1000 Days (conception to second birthday) of life to ongoing healthy development.

Priority cohorts for SEPT 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 12 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 17 Mentors across Australia with a physical presence in each jurisdiction except for ACT and South Australia. This include, three Virtual Mentors to support young parents nationally with a particular focus on 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 uses the term 'mentor', 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.

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 are trusted guides who walk alongside their participants throughout the pathway program – from initial referral and first contact, to setting goals and working to achieve them, navigating access to support and resources, to celebration of their achievements and graduation from the program.

Our Mentors work together with the expecting 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.

Each SEPT Mentor manages a participant list, the number of which is based on working hours and the complexity of the presenting contexts. Brave also partners with and promotes existing pregnancy and parenting support services and educational opportunities. A core component of the program is to encourage our participants to engage with existing services that are local to them. This facilitates the building of connections with the community that they, and their child/ren will continue to be part of, after graduation from the SEPT program.

Brave's Impact

Since 2018, we have supported over 1200 expecting and parenting young people, including approximately 30% that identify as young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

Our program has achieved great success by supporting the holistic needs of our participants who are empowered to self-identify goals that are important to them. Participant goals typically focus on accessing basic needs; being an effective parent; building a safe, secure and positive family environment; fostering personal and family wellbeing, and pursuing education, training or employment. Ninety-five per cent of participants complete the program having achieved two or more specific goals. Qualitative evidence indicates that the mentoring support participants receive through the SEPT program has a profound impact on their and their children's lives.

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, Brave ensures that existing services are promoted and accessed – enhancing rather than duplicating support. For example, increased participant attendance and connection with maternal and child health services improves confidence in parenting and wellbeing outcomes.

In addition, 500 children were also positively impacted in 2022 through their connection to Brave. 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 our [Brave Foundation Impact Report 2022](#).

Supporting Young Parents

Whilst pregnancy for some families can be a joyous experience, for others, it can be an extremely stressful time and exacerbate existing disadvantage and future likelihoods for both parents and their children. This is particularly evident for young parents, who are themselves amid a complex developmental transition. Many young parents demonstrate resilience and have positive aspirations for their families lives but they also lack necessary supports during their transition to new parenthood (1-3).

The hardship young parents face is commonly driven by the intersection of age with disadvantage and complex circumstances that existed prior to pregnancy (1). Young parents within the Australian context are often 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. Unfortunately, young parents are often stigmatised because of their age and studies indicate that the stigma and systemic discrimination young parents experience is a major barrier to accessing the support and opportunities they need to fulfil their goals (1). Because of this, the disadvantage accumulates, and young parents are further alienated from active participation in their communities. This, in turn, can impact their children.

Over the past decade, approximately 80,000 new Australian mothers were aged 19 years or younger (4). Whilst the overall trend for adolescent births has declined in South Australia and nationally, there are parts of Australia, predominantly in rural and regional areas where birth rates to teen mothers have increased (5). In 2021, almost a quarter (16 out of 68) South Australian local government areas saw the rate of teen births increase (4). The proportion of Indigenous teenage mothers (aged under 20) has also been falling over time, from 20% in 2010 to 11% in 2020. However, this cohort remains significantly larger than the national comparison of 1.8% of mothers who gave birth aged under 20 (6) and the proportion of young mothers who are Indigenous remains high at 33.4% in 2021 (4). These trends raise concerns about the potential for increased stigmatisation of rural and remotely located and indigenous young people and growing inequalities between these young people and non-indigenous young people living closer to urban centres.

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 (7). In the absence of necessary supports, the likelihood is that pregnancy and young parenthood becomes a contributing factor to lifelong socioeconomic disadvantage and health disparities for the mother and her child (8). These young people should be provided with resources during their parenting journey to support them and their children to thrive.

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 achieving their personal goals and supporting the positive development and wellbeing of their children (9). Research shows that, despite being motivated, the perception that some young mothers have that services are not relevant for their age has prevented them from accessing support (10). In contrast, Brave participants have highlighted the value and impact of the relational, non-judgemental and flexible support provided by their mentors for overcoming barriers to pursuing their goals and accessing support for themselves and their children.

Brave acknowledges the intent to focus SA's Youth Action Plan on five key areas for action:

1. Physical Health, and Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health
2. Safety and Justice

3. Education and Employment
4. Connections and Access to Resources
5. Citizenship and Participation

We particularly welcome the recognition that supporting young parents can have intergenerational impacts.

For the purpose of this submission, our response will focus on action areas 1, 3 and 5.

Action Area 1: Physical Health, and Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health

Health Services

Teenage pregnancy is a global health issue, not unique to Australia, that adversely affects birth outcomes and can lead to intergenerational cycles of poverty and ill-health (15). Young mothers are a specific vulnerable cohort who need to be supported, ideally from conception of their first child. They are less likely to engage in antenatal and postnatal care and, if they do, must overcome the associated access and financial barriers (14-15).

Brave seeks to achieve outcomes with our young parents and their children which include increased parenting confidence, safety, stability and healthy child development, improved overall health of all family members, connectedness to community, improved family relationships and resilience.

What happens to children in the early years has consequences right through the course of their lives. While there are many opportunities to intervene and make a difference to the lives of children and young people, research suggests that intervening in early childhood, including the antenatal period, is the most effective phase to impact on the future development of the child (12).

In terms of antenatal care, teenage girls are less likely to have five or more antenatal appointments and, if they do present, often do so later in the pregnancy. First Nations teenage girls attend even fewer antenatal appointments, with almost a tenth attending only one or two visits (13). Critical to addressing this issue is the provision of a safe, understanding and supportive environment where services are designed and delivered to meet the needs of young parents and their children. However, this does not always occur.

In line with existing evidence, many of our most vulnerable families find that previous negative interactions, relationships or experiences with government or authority figures increased their reluctance to connect with services and supports (14).

*“Other adults don’t listen to me because of my age”
- Brave participant*

This hesitancy to access vital antenatal support can lead to concerning outcomes for children that may have long term impacts on their development. Due to some of the challenges and increased likelihood of mental health issues and substance use such as smoking, infants born to teenage mothers are more likely to be preterm, have low birthweight and be small for gestational age (15).

Postnatal care is also of concern with teen mothers less likely to seek post-birth care, breastfeeding support or assistance maintaining a healthy diet (16). Brave participants have emphasised the value of their mentors’ direct

assistance to access services and supports and some noted the difficulties they face when these resources are not readily available in their local communities.

*“My mentor and I keep running into roadblocks because of what’s it’s like in our community...
It would be so much easier for her to help us if she could get us the help we need.”
- Brave participant*

Importantly, recent research has found that effective mothering is a primary goal for many young mothers and employment is secondary (17), something Brave participants have also affirmed. Systematic changes that first and foremost supports young parents to focus on the needs of their young children and on being an effective parent would also align with the First 1000 Days evidence base.

Brave acknowledges the South Australian government investment in additional health and development checks that will be available from next year through Child and Family Health Service. If the special needs of young mothers are recognised, and maternal and family services are adjusted to meet these requirements, the outcomes for both mothers and their children can improve (15).

For new mothers facing disadvantage, Sustained Nurse Home Visiting (SNHV) is one of the best-evidenced interventions for supporting women in the first 1000 days of parenthood. There is a growing body of evidence that holistic, place-based outreach programs (such as Brave’s SEPT program) can support healthy child development with more responsive parenting, consistent routines, better home safety, and improved maternal mental health and self-efficacy (14).

Further consideration is also needed to address the fragmented antenatal and postnatal systems that currently do not offer consistent continuity of care for mothers and their children during the first 1000 days.

The experience of parenthood clearly has many implications for young mothers, however, commencing parenting at a young age is highly gendered, with the consequences of teenage parenthood differing for mothers and fathers. It should be noted that the evidence for this is limited with most research focused on young mothers so that very little is known about the consequences of teen parenting for fathers (19). Demographic data related to young fathers is also unknown with reporting through means such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics also centred solely on mothers’ age. Nevertheless, based on Brave’s experience with support young fathers can also improve outcomes for themselves, their partners and their children, similarly to young mothers.

Brave participants often reflect about the changes that were already occurring to their parenting skills as a result of their relationship with their mentor. Their growth in confidence fed into skills to be a good parent.

“I like how I’ve learned new skills such as learning how to better my fathering towards my children.”

Q5. How can the South Australian Government improve the availability and accessibility of health services to young people?

Brave welcomes the potential action identified that includes supporting young parents to build their parenting skills and capacity, including more programs targeted to young fathers.

There is a critical need for additional Brave support across South Australia with only virtual services currently available in this state. There is an opportunity for the South Australian government to replicate the state/federal funding partnership we have in Tasmania to expand our service to meet local needs, implement relevant state policy such as [Tasmania's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy](#) and ensure sustained service delivery. It is proposed that Brave Mentors are introduced to deliver consistent face to face support in South Australia targeting the local government areas of Playford, Salisbury, Onkaparinga, Port Adelaide, Mount Remarkable and Whyalla that were identified as having the highest rates of adolescent births in 2021 (4).

There is also an opportunity to build on the existing SEPT Program tailoring it to specifically meet the needs of young fathers. The vast majority of Brave's current participants are young mothers with approximately 1% participants identifying as fathers. Anecdotally, this has not been due to a lack of interest but rather that young fathers tend to not be actively recruited, nor do they feel welcomed or catered for in early parenting programs.

However, in recent times there has been growing interest from young fathers and our community partners to tailor our program to best support young fathers. Whilst we have been able to adapt the SEPT model to work with young fathers, Brave's experience and feedback from consultations with our participants, indicates that in order to support successful outcomes for fathers more rigorous research into evidence based and a gender appropriate approach is required.

Action Area 3: Education and Employment

Young Carers

Young parents face the challenge of meeting not only their own developmental needs at a time of significant growth, but also the needs of their children. The challenge for practitioners and policy makers is to create a range of supports that respond to the needs of both young parents and their children. If this is achieved, then teenage parenthood need not be a negative experience; rather, it can become a catalyst for growth and positive life outcomes (21).

Becoming a parent as a teen can be detrimental for both women and men in terms of high school completion and post-secondary attendance. However, research also tells us that young parents differ from young people who do not give birth during adolescence even before becoming parents – they are often more socioeconomically disadvantaged and may already be experiencing challenges in school (20). Notably, research also suggests teen mothers may fare better on educational attainment than teen fathers (19).

Despite potential challenges to completing education, evidence suggests that having children may also be motivational for teen parents to complete their education and ‘find a better life’ for themselves and their children. This indicates a need to understand how school-based programs can support teens in making educational progress and improve intergenerational outcomes (20).

Formal education for young parents works when it is conducted in a reasonably relaxed and unstructured way, and when the young parents are allowed to have input into the content of the program. Most importantly, when preventable barriers such as school policies and procedures, adequate childcare and transportation are addressed the likelihood of continuing education increases (21).

Specific findings from an evaluation of young parents education programs found five significant areas that enabled positive outcomes:

1. A sense of belonging through the prioritising of individualised support and programs
2. Educator understanding and flexibility with the needs of each parent and the impact this might have on their schooling
3. Educator understanding of factors that support student wellbeing
4. The vital role of mentoring and knowledge of an Early Parenting Support worker to support parenting skills
5. Program location inclusive of access to public transport, wellbeing support, housing, and welfare advice

On-site resources such as space for the child to sleep, high-chairs, cooking facilities, were also important. Underpinning all of these recommendations is the commitment from leadership at the location of the program and their need be a strong advocate, visibly championing those involved, ensuring a sense of belonging for young parents, enabling appropriate resourcing and general support (22).

Q12. How can the South Australian Government better meet the needs of young people with caring responsibilities?

Numerous programs supporting young parents to completion their education goals exist around Australia and the state however, there is no consistent approach used. Further to this, programs are often fragmented with little opportunity to learn from peers.

Brave welcome suggestions within the discussion paper to:

- Co-design innovative school-based supports for young people with significant caring roles to improve their educational, social and community inclusion.
- Improve access for young carers to training, further education and employment opportunities that fit their caring role.

Using an evidence-based and co-design approach to develop and enhance programs for young parents with caring responsibilities is critical.

Further investment in school-based programs that includes mentoring and supportive onsite resources such as childcare, flexible learning and access to transportation is encouraged.

Action Area 5: Citizenship and Participation

Youth Participation

Youth participation is widely understood as the engagement of young people in social, cultural, and political life. It refers to the creation of meaningful opportunities and spaces, and the dismantling of barriers, for all young people to contribute to issues that affect them. When done well, the process of youth participation is as beneficial as the outcome and the benefits are shared between young people and the organisation.

Lived experience is an asset that a participant will bring to the process of engagement. Our model recognises that young people are experts of their own lives, and their active participation in co-design processes will help develop meaningful enhancement and critique of service design and delivery. Authentic co-design processes are based on the understanding that from the very start, people with lived experience play an equal role in decisions regarding the conceptualisation, design and development of projects or processes (18).

When developing policy such as the Youth Action Plan, a diversity of experiences and views are needed to reflect the varying experience and challenges faced by families and children across South Australia. Brave's unique expertise, developed in partnership with youth participants and community stakeholders, means that Brave is well-positioned for understanding the needs of, and advocating for, the healthy development, wellbeing, rights, and safety of expecting and parenting young people and their children.

Brave's Model of Participation outlines an organisational commitment to working in evidence-informed ways and, in particular, learning from the experience, views, opinions and needs of those young people engaged in the service to better inform our decisions about service design and delivery.

There are many models and approaches to youth participation and inclusion of lived experience voice, all designed to promote and highlight these voices. The Brave model draws from research and key models and concepts of:

- Lundy Model: Space, Voice, Audience and Influence
- Hart's ladder of participation
- Shier's pathways to participation
- Experience based co-design
- United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child
- National Child Safe Principles

The Brave model also acknowledges that traditional models of participation may not appropriately or adequately reflect the approach needed when working with First Nations Peoples.

Q16. How can the South Australian Government promote young people's active participation in their communities?

Recently we have been working with the Commonwealth Government to ensure the lived experience of expecting or parenting young people is included in relevant policies from areas such as the Office for Women, Office for Youth, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations and the National Early Years Strategy. We also welcome the opportunity to facilitate this inclusion of lived experience to inform future South Australian policies and programs including the Youth Action Plan.

Other Comments

Policy and programs targeting young people are often centred solely on education and employment which does not take into account the diverse needs for young parents or the basic foundations that are required before one is ideally placed to even consider these goals.

Recent shifts in policy such as increased parental leave place an emphasis and value on prioritising parenting. This same importance is not afforded to young parents who based on their age are often required to demonstrate education and employment activities whilst simultaneously parenting during a crucial developmental stage in both their own and children's lives.

The South Australian Youth Action Plan has identified key action areas that if addressed can provide supportive environments for young parents and their children to thrive. Brave welcomes these actions and encourages further consideration of evidence and recommendations included in this submission.

Recommendations

In line with the evidence presented, Brave recommends the South Australian Government consider the following to be included and funded in Youth Action Plan:

- ✓ Any development of subsequent related policy and programs should be informed by the lived experience of young parents
- ✓ The introduction of Brave Mentors into South Australia as a wraparound service to support schools and Child and Family Health Service, specifically targeting local government areas with a high prevalence of teen births
- ✓ Investment in research to inform the development of programs such as SEPT specifically designed to support young fathers
- ✓ Review and expand school-based programs to support young parents complete their education
- ✓ Review whole of government policies that have direct implications for young parents

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