ParentsNext: Help or hindrance?

Report on the results of a survey undertaken by the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children & the Council of Single Mothers and their Children

June 2019
Executive summary

ParentsNext was trialled in 10 sites around Australia in 2016-2018, targeting parents of young children who receive government income support. It was expanded nationally in July 2018 with the stated intention to increase work readiness. Assessment by participants, community sector agencies and legal professionals has however found it to be rife with issues in design and implementation. Some of its practices stigmatise participating single parents and human rights agencies have declared it discriminatory in its targeting.

200 parents completed a survey about ParentsNext conducted by the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children, and the Council of Single Mothers and their Children, from January to the end of March 2019. Responses provide cause for concern.

- **60%** of respondents did not know why they were in the program.
- **87%** disagreed with the proposition that ‘ParentsNext assisted them to build job ready confidence and skills’, suggesting the program is not meeting its basic goals.
- **79%** disagreed that ‘their provider increased their confidence in connecting with their community’, and **48%** of them in fact indicated their confidence has decreased.
- Given the opportunity, **89%** of respondents say they would not design a program like the current ParentsNext.

The stated aim of ParentsNext is to help parents of children between six months and six years ‘set education and employment goals, develop a pathway to achieve their goals and link them to services and activities in the local community’.¹ This aim matches the desire of many single parents keen to overcome education deficits, compete in difficult employment environments and secure and sustain paid employment to improve their family’s financial wellbeing.

The means of implementing this aim however, is to compel low income partnered and single parents to reduce their focus on parenting their very young children and to engage in activities set out by the program, regardless of the relevance these activities may have to work or study goals. Should a parent demur or refuse, they risk losing their benefits – their primary and often only source of income. This compulsion sits at odds with Australia’s international commitment to provide these families with social security and “an adequate standard of living”² and has deeply disappointed, even betrayed, the expectations of those who entered the program keen to have assistance to get ahead.

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ParentsNext has become a punitive compliance program with participating parents required to engage in non-work related parenting activities, and more appointments and activities than are actually required by the guidelines. Some parents are unable to be exited from the program even when they meet the criteria for exemptions.

There is no national quality standard, with the experience of each parent reliant on the particular provider staff members they encounter. Far too commonly, parents’ experience has been that ParentsNext staff show little or no appreciation of the realities of sole parenting, the difficulties of limited finances, the barriers presented by minimal English skills or disability, the cultural priorities of indigenous women, or the ongoing trauma besetting many women who have escaped family violence.

We contend the program is flawed in its conception, and discriminatory and unfair in its execution. Compliance with activities is underpinned by perverse financial incentives and made further problematic by automated reporting.

Critically, the wellbeing of children is put at risk when their parent is placed under undue stress or if the parent’s income is suspended or breached.

“I have been forced to seek employment on my own (without the help of a provider) because I am scared my payments will be cut off. I feel unable to speak to the provider, and even when I do speak, I am constantly spoken down to, spoken over the top of, and ignored.”

Survey respondent, 2019 (as are all further quotes)

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Background

ParentsNext is a Federal Government program for parents of children aged six months to six years who meet certain eligibility criteria. It is managed through the Department of Jobs and Small Business (the Department) which engages service providers (both commercial employment agencies and non-profit organisations) through competitive tender. These services in turn work directly with individuals.

Program snapshot

- ParentsNext was trialled in ten ‘disadvantaged’ areas from mid-2016. In July 2018 it expanded into all 51 JobActive employment areas across Australia.
- ParentsNext has two streams; intensive and targeted, and eligibility is multi-layered.
  - **Individuals with base eligibility** are those who receive from Centrelink, the Parenting Payment (Single or Couple), have a child under six years of age, and have had no earnings in the past six months.
  - ‘**Targeted stream**’ parents are early school leavers with a youngest child one year old; ‘highly disadvantaged’ with a youngest child at least three years of age; or they are in a jobless family with a youngest child aged five.
  - ‘**Intensive stream**’ parents are in locations with high Indigenous populations. Participants in this steam are Indigenous; early school leavers with a youngest child six months of age; deemed ‘highly disadvantaged’ and with a youngest child of six months; or have a youngest child aged five.
- ParentsNext has been linked to the Centrelink Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF) since it was expanded on 1 July 2018. This means if parents do not meet an obligation (even if their failure to do so is due to an error on the part of the service provider), ‘behave inappropriately’ do not tell their provider they can’t meet their requirement, or do not present an excuse deemed adequate by the provider, they can immediately have a payment suspended and accrue ‘demerit points’ which last for 6 months and accumulate towards having their payment ‘breached’ - meaning that for a specific period, they receive no payment.

Councils of Single Mothers and their Children interest in ParentsNext

National Council of Single Mothers and their Children (NCSMC) and Council of Single Mothers and their Children (CSMC) were first alerted to issues with ParentsNext in 2016. Stories came steadily from around Australia from parents and some from staff in provider agencies, distressed at the work they are required to do. These stories increased significantly with the national expansion of the program.

During 2017 and 2018, NCSMC and CSMC engaged with the Department to raise issues and recommend improvements. In March 2018, CSMC visited Shepparton, a trial site in Victoria, and spoke with parents, provider staff and staff in local welfare agencies who had clients involved in ParentsNext. The feedback was captured in a report which was shared with the Department of
Jobs and Small Business. This report was not made public until it was linked to a submission to the Senate Review in January 2019.

In 2019, both NCSMC and CSMC wrote submissions to the Senate Committee Review of ParentsNext. We launched this survey to give participants a stronger voice, appeared before the Committee in February, and supported single mothers to meet with the Committee and tell their stories.

About the survey

Both Councils of Single Mothers and their Children welcomed news in December 2018 of a Senate Committee review into ParentsNext. Working with single mother families for fifty years, we are committed to amplifying single mothers’ voices on issues affecting them. We launched the survey through Facebook on the 8 January 2019 to gather frontline data. Our submissions to the Senate Review were submitted 7 February 2019 and incorporated the findings from the then 85 survey respondents.

The survey remained open and at 26 March 2019 had been completed by 200 parents, 95% of them single mothers. Marketing of the survey has been limited to occasional posts on Facebook.

The survey consisted of 69 statements organised into 5 themes. Respondents were able to choose a response of: not applicable, strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree. There was no compulsion to comment on every statement although most did. The use of ‘not applicable’ and ‘neutral’ is sometimes confusing but with 200 valid responses, the clear uses of the ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’ categories make for compelling insights.

Council of Single Mothers and their Children and the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children acknowledge the pro bono assistance of Associate Professor Beth Goldblatt in designing the survey.
Profiles of respondents

All 200 survey respondents were participants in ParentsNext.

One hundred and ninety one were single mothers and one a single father. Five women who responded were ‘partnered parents’ and one man who responded was ‘partnered’.

Comments show two of the female partnered parents were newly partnered and one had re-partnered with the children’s father.

The majority of parents responding had one or two children with 21% having three children. It is somewhat curious that 13% of parents in the program have four or more children as this constitutes a ‘large family’ of four or more children, and is a reason for exemption from ParentsNext.

Of 197 people who answered the question, sixteen (8%) were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. A few parents add that while they are not Indigenous, their child is.

Seven respondents (3.5%) said English is not their first language, and fifteen (7.6%) had a disability.

These percentages do not reflect the overall make-up of ParentsNext participants, where December 2018 figures show that:

- 18% are Indigenous parents
- 19% identify as being culturally and linguistically diverse, and
- 14% are people with a disability.³

³ DJSB question on notice to the Committee, Number 3 report p.43
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/ParentsNext/Additional_Documents

ParentsNext: Help or hindrance? A joint report by the Councils of Single Mothers and their Children, 2019
Key findings

1. Information and understanding

60% of survey respondents did not feel they were given clear information about why they were in the program and 89% did not know they had a right to ‘10 thinking days before signing the participation plan’.

This suggests a shocking breach of transparency and raises questions of coercive practices, whether intended or not.

Lack of good information provision is borne out in other areas including:

- 87% of respondents did not know which stream they are in and what funding is therefore available to support their activities;
- 33% did not understand compliance and suspension rules and 34% were not clear about their obligations and reporting requirements;
- 38% who were granted an exemption still had to report to the provider during the exemption period;
- 59% did not feel their questions and concerns had been taken seriously;
- 75% did not know they could ring the National Customer Service Line with concerns;
- 75% were not informed they could change provider, if there was more than one in their area;
- 79% agreed with the statement that ‘the possibility of payment suspension makes you less willing to speak your mind with the ParentsNext provider’;
- 7% agreed with having been referred to ParentsNext whilst 83% of respondents did not feel they should be required to participate.

At the Senate Review of ParentsNext, the Department of Jobs and Small Business insisted that the rules concerning privacy and consent were clearly understood by providers and properly implemented. Respondents to this survey disagreed:

“I know the privacy statement is not mandatory but the manager told me I HAD to sign it or they would refer me back to Centrelink and I could lose my pay. I showed them proof I didn’t have to sign but they still wouldn’t accept that information so I felt I had no option but to sign it in case I get a demerit point”
2. Experiences with provider agencies

It is reasonable to expect that government programs – particularly mandatory ones - will be delivered with high quality service and that our government will invest tax payers’ money in ways that ensure the best possible short- and long-term benefits for the beneficiaries of each program. It is also reasonable to expect such programs and their staff to treat participants with respect and not impinge upon their human rights.

Our survey findings indicate neither consistent high quality service delivery nor value for the investment of tax payer funds. Findings also indicate a disturbing encroachment on the rights of low income parents that would likely be the subject of a national outcry if the participants were other benefit recipients, such as age pensioners.

2.1. Critical outcome areas

In key areas where the government has continually claimed success, survey respondents gave ParentsNext a damning review.

- **Over 79%** disagreed that the ‘provider has increased their confidence in connecting with their community’.

- **48%** agreed with the statement that the ‘provider has decreased their confidence in connecting with their community’.

- **62%** agreed that ‘the (ParentsNext) program has increased stigma and I feel different when using community services’. Only **19%** disagreed with this statement.

- Whilst **30%** of respondents felt ‘valued and treated with respect by the provider’, **42%** did not and others stayed neutral.

Two things are particularly alarming about these figures. As evidence now shows that entrenched inequality is a significant social determinant of poor health, these figures if replicated at a greater scale, suggest a profoundly unhealthy public policy response. Further, support for these families who have been identified by the program as particularly disadvantaged and/or vulnerable is being vested in providers, many of whom are commercial employment providers without the skills to appropriately address vulnerability.

2.2. Knowledgeable and respectful treatment

Culture

- Of thirty-eight parents responding to the question regarding culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, six agreed with the proposition that ‘services suggest activities culturally appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and employ Indigenous case workers’. Thirteen disagreed and nineteen remained neutral.
Among respondents for whom English is not their first language, numbers were evenly divided as to whether or not ‘their ParentsNext provider has the skills to assist them’.

Disability
- Among the sixty-two respondents for whom disability was relevant, 15% agreed with the proposition that ‘their needs and access were understood and included in their service’. 55% disagreed and 30% remained neutral.

Financial hardship
- 75% of respondents disagreed with the proposition that their ‘provider displays awareness of the limitations and effects of financial hardship’.

Family violence

In a new national program, we may reasonably expect that best practices will be displayed, particularly in relation to issues that have been a consistent focus of tax payer funding and social commentary. Family violence is one such example but data and comments make it clear that ParentsNext interviewing and information management practices are far from exemplary.

- Of the one hundred and ninety-eight respondents who commented on statements in this section, 50% were affected by family violence.

- Of these, 60% disagreed with the proposition that ‘the provider demonstrated knowledge, awareness and sensitivity regarding your safety and needs’. 23% remained neutral and 16% agreed with the statement.

“I have had to see a different staff member at each appointment, and have been asked to explain in extensive detail particulars surrounding family court, domestic violence etc. This is done without regard for the personal and sensitive nature of their questions or the fact that it is inappropriate to discuss this within the hearing of my children. A lot of the questioning is irrelevant, and none of the staff seem to have any knowledge of the family court system or domestic violence issues”.

“I was doing well before the program. I had escaped domestic violence and was building a new life. I had overcome severe PTSD and depression and had started studying again. The abusive and threatening way I was treated by the ParentsNext provider triggered PTSD... I’m now needing to see a psychologist again.”

Sole parenting
As single mothers are the clear majority group in ParentsNext, awareness of the demands of sole parenting should be a required and core competency. However 65% felt their provider did not demonstrate such awareness.

“My provider did not understand at all what it was like to be a sole parent. He kept telling me about how many kids he had and how great his wife was!!”

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3. Activities

A core component of ParentsNext is the participation plan that each participant signs. The plan is intended to be a clear reflection of a goal setting process, with agreed activities as steps to achieving the goal. These activities are mandatory and failure to attend may result in payment penalties. According to guidelines, the plan is to be mutually agreed upon. This is worth stressing as once signed, the plan becomes the basis for reporting and compliance.

Responses in these figures indicate that the power imbalance significantly undermines this process.

38% of respondents indicate the activities on which their plan is based were mutually agreed. 35% disagree and 27% remained neutral.

Given that parents of young children are, on the whole, a time poor cohort who often have to factor in unexpected changes through such things as a child being ill or refusing to participate, it is important that the activities agreed to are open to review and change as necessary.

29% indicated they felt the activities were ‘manageable and could be changed’ if necessary but 50% disagreed with this proposition.
31% of the overall number of parents compelled to participate in ParentsNext have experienced suspension of their payments due to non-attendance at weekly activities or failure to report attendance.4

Given these figures, provided by the Department, it is of great concern that only 35% of survey respondents felt it would be manageable for them to contact the provider before an activity if they needed to cancel. 38% did not feel this would be manageable and 26% remained neutral.

Among survey respondents who had experienced payment suspension, 27% agreed it was ‘because of non-attendance at an activity or appointment without notifying the provider that you could not attend’. 26% remained neutral and 45% disagreed.

57.5% agreed with a separate statement that their suspension ‘was because of an error made by DHS or the ParentsNext provider’.

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4 1 July 2018 to 31 January 2019, 23,507 ParentsNext participants were sent 89,588 SMS messages advising their payment had been suspended. Department of Jobs and Small Business Question No. SQ19-000089 page 7. Available at: Report 6 https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/ParentsNext/Additional_Documents

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4. Implications for children

It is well accepted that assisting parents to become work ready will ultimately benefit children. ParentsNext however, has crossed the line from a vocational and pre-employment program to one that compels parents to take their children to a variety of parenting activities. The provider staff who make these decisions are not always trained or skilled in welfare and child development. Additionally ParentsNext has complicated parents’ lives and added to the stress of one of the most time poor cohorts in our community – parents of young children. Thus we asked the question: is parents’ participation simultaneously having negative consequences for their children?

- 72% of survey respondents agree that ‘ParentsNext has not introduced their child to new activities as we were already attending or planned to attend’.

- Only 6% agreed with the statement that ‘ParentsNext has had a positive impact on my child’ while 72.5% disagreed and 21.5% remained neutral.

- 39% of those for whom a child-friendly environment was relevant were pleased with the space provided, while 35% do not consider the provider spaces as welcoming and child-safe.

- 63% of respondents agreed with the proposition that: ‘ParentsNext is not appropriate because the children are too young’, with 15% disagreeing and 22% neutral.

- 84% of those for whom childcare was applicable did not receive any assistance from the provider to either access financial assistance for childcare or to locate childcare.

We welcome child welfare experts delving further into these sorts of questions and analysing the impacts of compulsory participation in ParentsNext, the creation and exacerbation of stress on the parents, and the impact of suspension of payments on the wellbeing of children.

“I am angry and disappointed with the way they treated me and my child. I was told that I’m not to bring my child back with me to appointments AND I was asked ‘has your child got something?’”

“I am exempt from activities because I home school my children. However, I am required to report fortnightly with the threat of having my payments withheld if I do not. There is no leeway to this, I have tried to report early and cannot. I am a single parent with three challenging children, dealing with an abusive ex-partner and my financial situation is extremely precarious. ParentsNext has added nothing to my life except constant anxiety that I will be punished and my children will suffer.”
5. Program impacts on parents

If social connectedness, job ready skills and confidence are not being built as expected among survey respondents, and the majority have little confidence in how their provider are being treated by their provider, what impact is all this having on them?

- **80%** feel ParentsNext has added a cost burden to their already stretched budget.
- **93%** agreed ‘ParentsNext added additional stress to their lives’.
- **77%** would prefer to reside in an area where there is no ParentsNext.
- Only **4.5%** of respondents agreed ParentsNext ‘provided financial assistance enabling them to attend activities’.
- **11%** of respondents agreed it had ‘assisted them to think about a career path’.
- **50%** of parents involved in the survey consider ‘they would be better off staying at home to care for young children’.

Among hundreds of comments in the survey, there are a disturbing number that indicate people feel the program is pushing them backwards.

“I’m feeling more isolated and less supported. Social workers at Centrelink are fabulous but private providers appear unwilling or unable to assist.”

“I find it offensive that I’ve managed to run my own life for 10 years but now I have to report to an agency that I attended playgroup?!?! Which by the way I’ve been doing for 10 years.”

“The vilification of (overwhelmingly) women who are raising children due to the government concocting the image of us all bludging is mass, state sanctioned discrimination.”

“I’m a qualified youth worker and they told me I need to do voluntary work or I will lose my payments. I was told I need to put my child in childcare even though I can’t afford it. I will be going back to work when my child is at school. They told me I need to study but I will need to pay for the course myself and as I can’t afford it I don’t know how I will do that and I have a career to go back to and don’t require other training.”

“The ParentsNext program is adding more financial stress to being a single mum.”
“The ParentsNext program sounds fantastic when you read about it. The problem is the provider did not offer anything in the program and said ‘maybe you can find something yourself’ when I asked about referrals for support around starting life again after violence and homelessness. The provider I have had to deal with has not offered any help. The only thing they’ve done is print a job plan and explain my consequences for not obeying the orders”.

“This program is such a waste. I want to work. My plan was as soon as my son started school (this year) I would find suitable work within school hours. Now to not have my payments cut I need to attend a coffee and arts club, the people who run it are great, but I fail to see how coffee and art will make me ‘job ready’.”

“I was already studying full time yet made to attend ParentsNext compulsory appointments for them to write on a piece of paper that my participation is full time study. Total waste of time as I get no help, I get no assistance towards my university course or transport costs and it means I lose a day of study to attend a pointless appointment.”

“I’m almost 40 being made to feel like I’m 15 again!”

6. The future of ParentsNext

These experiences among participants in the ParentsNext program were borne out at the Senate Committee Review and suggest that the name and nature of the current program are now so tainted that a complete reimagining is required about how to increase work readiness for this cohort. Sensibly, a reimagined and high quality pre-vocational program would be accessed by other relevant populations (such as young and older jobseekers).

In designing the survey, we were interested to see what those who had been participating in ParentsNext would do with it if they had control.

**89% of respondents would design a different program to the current ParentsNext.**

- **85%** would prefer no program but access to funds to undertake education and pre-employment activities.
- **80%** would have a program built on career advice and support.
- **78%** believe planning for the future is best left to them.

A voluntary pre-employment program that does not have penalties

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“Help is fantastic but not like this! Telling single parents that they will not have rent money if they don’t click a button on a certain day or if there is a glitch in the system their payment might not go through is gross! I am a person that can’t wait to get back into full time work. I organised my study and all childcare etc. and have now been signed up to this ParentsNext program. It is aggressive and demeaning. The longer you are out of work the scarier it is and yes please and thank you for the help to get back into work. But the “attend or lose payment” is so aggressive and I am 100% keen to study and work and require no help whatsoever to get back into it. Make people feel confident not like they are shit and begging.”

“Instead of paying providers to get rich on private sector profits and corrupt kickbacks, redirect the funds directly to a parent who is studying.”

“Should the ParentsNext program continue to run, program facilitators should be more educated on funding and services to help with study and/or employment, combined with the pressures of parenting. They should also have a stronger networking base with employers who are empathetic to the struggles of working and parenting and can provide flexible working arrangements for single parents who would like to work.”

“It is always a positive thing to provide education, support and guidance but it should be voluntary with no threat to one’s payments. Reporting income fortnightly when there is no income to report is an annoying waste of time.”

“The current program is okay however providers need more flexibility with regard to personalizing the plans for each family. Also funding to pay for things like getting a driver’s license or a course they want to do.”

“The current ParentsNext program infringes the human rights of mothers and is an insult to all women.”
Conclusion

Both Councils of Single Mothers and their Children contend that however well-intentioned the Parliament may have been when it introduced ParentsNext, it must now be halted as a matter of urgency.

We base this assertion on the combined experiences of our agencies in working with parents in the program, the Department overseeing it and staff in provider agencies, together with the views of 200 parents participating in the program who responded to our survey.

We see harm being done to parents and children caught in this program, which amounts primarily to an ideological approach to balancing the national budget and reducing welfare dependence without ensuring positive benefits for participants.

We contend that the findings in this report are such that they justify an immediate closure or suspension of the program, particularly that:

- 93% agreed that ParentsNext added additional stress to their lives;
- 87% disagreed with the proposition that ParentsNext assisted them to build job ready confidence and skills, clearly suggesting the program is not meeting its basic goals;
- 49% agreed that ParentsNext has reduced their knowledge and parenting confidence;
- 79% disagreed that ‘their provider increased their confidence in connecting with their community’, and 48% of them in fact thought that this confidence has been decreased.

We recommend that allocated funds be redirected into a high quality voluntary work readiness program, co-created together with experts and potential participants, that will genuinely assist parents and other job seekers to overcome the structural barriers they face to securing work; assist them to make informed decisions about their own skills, interests and local employment markets; and enable them to secure work that will improve their financial situation in the long-term, as minimum wage work will not.

“I feel it is unfair for the government to place such strict expectations (mandatory reporting and activities) on parents when the program itself is quite subpar and doesn’t offer enough support to increase a single parents potential for employability.”
“I found I was pushed towards a certain career path even though I stated numerous times that I cannot do that and was not interested. In the end I had no choice but to agree to their chosen career path and now it makes me feel ill that I cannot stand up for myself and my child's decisions.”

“Fortnightly reporting on my casual employment was working well for me and the children. ParentsNext has created unnecessary stress and I feel like a puppet on a string just for a payment!”

“I find the program a little degrading. I’m a single mum studying full time with a 4 year old. I’m working my butt off to provide a life for us and this makes me feel like I’m not doing enough to better our lives. I think it should be a voluntary program for people that aren’t sure about where to go for career/back to workplace assistance.”

“Why does our society insist on devaluing the incredibly important job that is raising children? ParentsNext is ineffective, offensive and a waste of time.”