

Submission to Workforce Australia Employment Services Enquiry: Parents Next Enquiry.

I make this submission regarding the role of ParentsNext in providing early intervention services to disadvantaged parents as part of the Employment Services system.

I have three points to make in this regard:

1. The disadvantage of sole parents, who are the majority of relevant disadvantaged parents, is a direct result of the current policy of removing them from Family Benefits when the youngest child turns 8 years, and attaching them to the Job Seeker program.

A parent, usually a mother, with an 8-year-old child, and probably other not much older children, has too many parenting responsibilities to be in a position to meet the requirements of the Job Seeker program, or, indeed, to take up full time employment.

These arrangements are condemning successive generations of Australian mothers and children to poverty.

2. The punitive, insensitive and inadequately personally responsive processes of Job Seeker are particularly inappropriate and unsuccessful in preparing such parents, who have been properly absent from paid work while parenting small children, for a return to the workforce.
3. The inclusion of compulsory (supposed) parenting training measures by an employment services system is outrageously inappropriate, as well as contrary to international and Australian national human rights and anti-discrimination standards.

I make these points informed by my personal experience, while working in the former Department of Social Security, as the National Director of the Jobs, Education and Training (JET) scheme for the preparation of sole parents to return to the workforce after years of parenting. JET, the first Australian program for this purpose, was established by the Hawke/Keating ALP federal government in 1989. JET was developed in response to the government's early mutual responsibility measure of ending the Sole Parent Pension when a youngest child turned 16 years, an age that gave such parents adequate time to prepare for a return to paid work.

Before establishing JET, the government determined, through professional social survey research, that by far the majority of sole parents were anxious to achieve economic independence rather than to continue on government benefits. The program provided a team of specially trained case managers, the JET Advisers, located in Social Security Offices all over the nation, to assist clients in working out their preparatory needs and employment plans; assistance with enrolling in a TAFE or university; priority access to child-care while training; priority assistance from the then nationally distributed Commonwealth Employment Services in finding employment appropriate to their expectations, training and hours of availability. The courses clients undertook varied with their needs, from literacy and numeracy education to full scale degrees leading to professional employment, and often including courses provided by TAFE to assist those returning to employment with the various forms of help they needed, from increased confidence to interviewing skills. (It will be clear that many of these arrangements depended on government agencies no longer in existence.)

The program was advertised by the government as providing the opportunity for sole parents to go back to work without neglecting their most important job – namely the care of their children.

Supporting all of the provisions made was one basic principle. Participation in JET was **NOT compulsory**. Personal choice was recognised as a driving motivation for positive participation as well as for successful completion of either training or workforce return.

The wisdom of that provision, as well as the reassurance and assistance made available, was the success of JET in both attracting participants and in ensuring their successful return to paid work.

Sometimes the best way for a government to move into the future is to learn from the past.

Dr Janet Ramsay PSM