

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

ParentsNext Survey – January 2019

Jointly undertaken by the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children and Council of Single Mothers and their Children, Victoria to aid the submission process for the review of **‘ParentsNext, its trial and subsequent broader rollout’**.

Friday, 1 February 2019

Background and survey limitations

Council of Single Mothers and their Children realised very early in the trial of ParentsNext that there were few options for participating parents to express their views about the program in ways that felt safe from any reprisal. In March 2018 we visited Shepparton a trial site in Victoria, and interviewed participants, provider staff and local welfare agencies. We discovered there both a great reluctance among participants to say anything that might identify them and a lack of confidence generally that their formal feedback was acted upon. On the basis of this visit, Council of Single Mothers and their Children prepared a report for the Department of Jobs and Small Business with a view to sharing our findings and suggesting improvements prior to the national roll-out of ParentsNext.

The government decision to review the ParentsNext trial and subsequent roll-out is welcomed by both the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc. and Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc. (based in Victoria). As organisations working with single mother families for fifty years, we are committed to amplifying the voices of single mothers on issues affecting them. We therefore decided to conduct a survey and to share the findings with other organisations in a small network concerned to assist the government and the Department to identify problems with the program and to rectify these.

This survey was prepared on Survey Monkey and released through Facebook, 8 January 2019. At the point of analysis, it has been open for eleven days.

This period is a very short one in which to generate interest and garner sufficient confidence from participants and staff in provider agencies to have a high return rate. This is compounded by the fact that with the review called 7 December and submissions closing 1 February, the review is essentially taking place during summer school holidays. This is a notoriously bad time to engage any parent in non-child related activities and even more so for those who are sole parents. Whilst some in the ParentsNext program have only one pre-school age child, many more will have older children on holiday. We did not therefore have high expectations and are pleased that 85 program participants completed the survey, 82 of whom are single mothers. Advertising was primarily through Facebook and word of mouth.

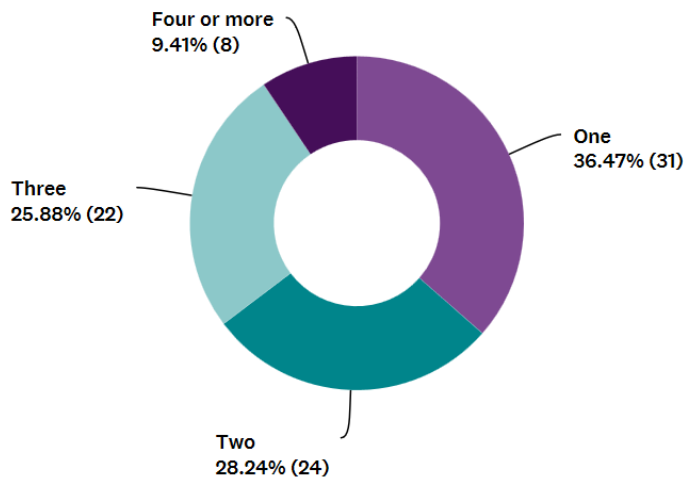
Council of Single Mothers and their Children and the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children acknowledge the pro bono assistance of Associate Professor Beth Goldblatt in designing the survey.

Respondent profile

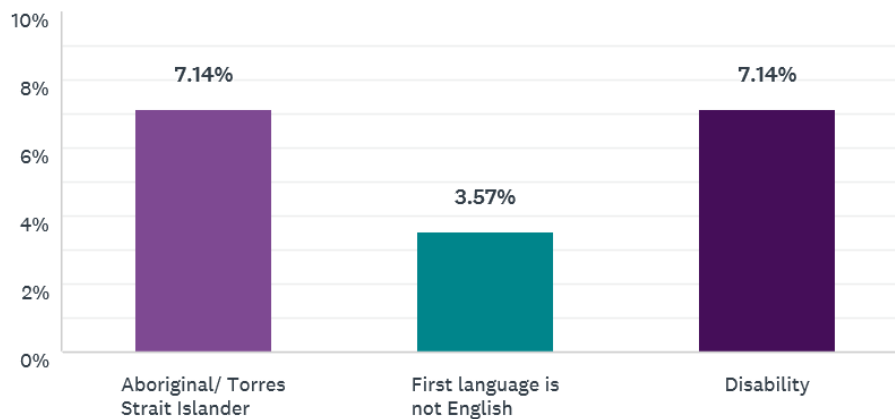
Of the 85 respondents, all are participants in the ParentsNext program

96.5% (82) are single mothers, 2% (2) are female partnered parents and 1% (1) is a male partnered parent. Participation was compulsory for 86.6% of respondents (12.2% were unsure, 1% voluntary)

Number of children



Demographics (answered by 84)



Responses to survey questions

A. Statements relating to knowledge of ParentsNext and experiences with DHS-Centrelink and the ParentsNext Program (answered by 84-85)

Brief discussion on these figures is below the tables.

1. **The information and appointment/s with DHS-Centrelink made it clear why you were selected to attend ParentsNext,**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 5% | 3.5% | 16% | 13% | 26% | 35% |

2. **You agree with the DHS-Centrelink outcome referring you to ParentsNext?**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 5% | 1% | 3.5% | 7% | 53% | 31% |

3. **Your child was provided with a welcoming and child-safe space.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 18% | 3.5% | 25% | 27% | 15% | 12% |

4. **You were provided with a welcoming and confidential space.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 11% | 7% | 28% | 27% | 11% | 16% |

5. **The activities were agreed between yourself and the provider.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 11% | 9% | 21% | 24% | 19% | 16% |

6. **The activities are manageable, and you feel that they could be changed if required.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 9% | 3.5% | 22% | 16% | 26% | 22% |

7. **You knew that you had 10 'thinking days' before signing your plan.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 9% | 1% | 2% | 2% | 24% | 61% |

8. **You are clear about your obligations and reporting.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 2% | 8% | 38% | 16% | 22% | 13% |

9. **The provider has helped you to access financial assistance and/ or support to locate childcare.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 18% | 2% | 1% | 9% | 28% | 41% |

10. **The provider has told you what 'stream' you are and therefore what funds are available to support the agreed activities.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 6% | 2% | 5% | 7% | 29% | 52% |

11. **You understand the compliance and suspension rules.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 2% | 7% | 42% | 11% | 20% | 18% |

12. It's manageable for you to contact the provider before an activity if you cannot attend.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 8% | 7% | 25% | 26% | 24% | 11% |

13. You are comfortable with the ParentsNext provider contacting a service to confirm your attendance, after you have self-reported.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 9% | 8% | 18% | 8% | 26% | 31% |

14. Appointments with the provider are made at least 5 days before your payment is due.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 20% | 5% | 12% | 34% | 19% | 11% |

15. If suspended, it was because of non-attendance at an activity or appointment without notifying the provider that you could not attend.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 55% | 3.5% | 6% | 10% | 12% | 14% |

16. If suspended, it was because of an error made by DHS or the ParentsNext provider.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 53% | 19% | 13% | 9% | 5% | 1% |

17. The possibility of payment suspension makes you less willing to speak your mind with the ParentsNext provider.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 7% | 49% | 24% | 8% | 6% | 6% |

18. You are informed of exemptions and if required that it has been granted.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 11% | 2% | 14% | 9% | 31% | 33% |

19. If granted an exemption, you did not need to report to the provider during this period

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 44% | 2% | 16% | 12% | 13% | 13% |

20.

Your questions and/ or concerns have been taken seriously and responded to promptly.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 11% | 2% | 11% | 20% | 27% | 29% |

21. You know that if you have concerns you can contact the National Customer Service Line.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 2% | 7% | 12% | 11% | 39% | 29% |

22. You were informed that you can change provider (if you live in a location with more than one).

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 8% | 5% | 15% | 4% | 34% | 34% |

Discussion

These figures present a concerning story.

Over 60% of parents do not feel they were given clear information about why they were in the program and **85% did NOT know they had a right to '10 thinking days before signing the participation plan'**. This is a shocking breach of transparency and informed consent and immediately raises questions of coercive practices, whether they were intended to be such or not. This lack of good information provision is borne out in other areas including:

- 81% not knowing which stream they are in and what funding is therefore available to support their activities
- 37% do not understand compliance and suspension rules
- 64% disagreeing with the notion that they are informed about exemptions and receive advice if one is granted
- 26% who were granted an exemption and still had to report to the provider during the exemption period
- 56% do not feel their questions and concerns have been taken seriously
- 68% do not know they could ring the National Customer Service Line with any concerns
- 68% were not informed they could change provider, if there was more than one in their area.

Well over 80% of respondents do not feel they should be required to participate in ParentsNext. Whilst it is good that **33% of those for whom a child-friendly environment was relevant were pleased with the space**, it is concerning that 34% of the relevant group do not consider the provider spaces as welcoming and child-safe.

A very worrying figure is that 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.

A selection of respondent comments on issues are provided below.

Selected comments on this question:

"I was treated like an uninformed and uneducated woman. He dismissed all of my questions and queries and forced me to sign the consent waiver and job plan straight away! I'm on maternity leave and have a job I'm returning to in February as a nurse!!"

"An exemption was granted due to my DV circumstances. I relocated into an emergency house a few weeks later and the whole process started over. They reinstated my exemption, but it took two very long phone calls and two emails to do so. Apparently if an exemption is granted your service provider removes your file, with no evidence left. I was distraught."

"I found out all information myself. I was not explained anything. I was only threatened that non-compliance will result in being suspended. It took multiple complaints and doctors' appointments before I was heard."

I was doing very well before the program. I had escaped domestic violence; I 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 from previously being mistreated by job service providers many years ago. I realised nothing had changed in many years, but had become even more inhumane. It triggered intense fears of being homeless again and I relapsed into panic attacks. I'm now needing to see a psychologist again, after having been doing remarkably well without therapy for 3 years. I was looking forward to the program and thought society had finally become more understanding

and supportive of single parents. However this was not the case. I soon found that once again it was a program of force and obedience or very harsh consequence. Now I must either continue seeing a psychologist for assistance with the harassment of ParentsNext providers, or comply with their demands. Studying wasn't accepted as an activity, but I was then told an activity with my youngest child is needed or I will be suspended. The only provider in the area is 45 minute walk, and I will have to attend or lose the only source of income we have. I will have to attend every month, and all that happens is a piece of paper printed and threats that if I do not sign it I will be suspended.

I was never offered any assistance and was never offered an exemption despite the very first things I told the woman having been related to the abuse I endured and reasons for being a single parent. This was ignored. The woman was so conditioned and robotic, I was not a human to her, just a cash cow for her to milk and exploit. I had not experienced emotional breakdown for over two years until the day of that first appointment. I've since had several breakdowns and feel like I am not worthy of life any longer. I feel so ashamed and disgusted in myself. I have been made to feel I am a criminal and a poor mother who is said to be abusive to my children for not working. I find it very frightening these providers are allowed to abuse people this way, and we have to really stand up for ourselves or we will be squashed by these people.

The provider I had to see did not care about me or my children. They only cared that the form was signed. They repeatedly said I have no choice, its legislation and compulsory. Even after I found the information on exemptions did I start being heard? But I had to put in over 15 complaints to Centrelink and the National line before anyone even cared. It's heartbreaking that no one cares anymore."

"I have been lucky enough to have a provider who can see I don't really need this program but I still have to go through the motions. On reading the government criteria for compulsory participation I don't meet any of the second set of criteria but no one can tell me why I was selected for compulsory participation."

"There is much confusion between departments regarding exemption and exit criteria. As someone who was incorrectly referred to the program, I am now finding it impossible to obtain an exemption/exit."

B. Attitudes & Values: experiences with ParentsNext provider (answered by 81-83)

Discussion of key findings is provided below the tables.

1. **If you are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, has the provider suggested culturally appropriate activities and employed Indigenous case workers?**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 83% | 0% | 1% | 6% | 2% | 5% |

2. **If English is not your first language, does the provider have the skills to assist you?**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 89% | 0% | 2% | 6% | 0% | 2% |

3. **If you have a disability, are your needs and access understood and included in your service?**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 70% | 0% | 2% | 7% | 7% | 12% |

4. **If affected by domestic violence, has the provider demonstrated knowledge, awareness and sensitivity regarding your safety and needs?**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 52% | 5% | 2% | 11% | 11% | 18% |

5. **Has the provider demonstrated knowledge and awareness of the demands of sole parenting?**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 5% | 6% | 6% | 16% | 27% | 41% |

6. **Has the provider demonstrated knowledge and awareness regarding the limitations and effects of financial hardship?**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 1% | 5% | 4% | 18% | 30% | 42% |

7. **Do you feel valued and treated with respect by the provider?**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 1% | 8% | 19% | 31% | 18% | 22% |

8. **A voluntary and confidential 'emoji – rate my service' on the day of the appointment would be helpful.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 4% | 13% | 20% | 37% | 16% | 8% |

9. **The provider has increased my confidence in connecting me with my community.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 5% | 1% | 5% | 14% | 31% | 43% |

10. **The provider has decreased my confidence in connecting me with my community.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 5% | 19% | 29% | 25% | 10% | 12% |

11. **The program has increased stigma and I feel different when using community services.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 7% | 41% | 25% | 8% | 10% | 8% |

Discussion

In critical outcome areas, respondents are giving ParentsNext a 'thumbs-down'.

- Over 70% disagree that the provider has increased their confidence in connecting with their community;
- Perturbingly, 48% agree with the statement that the provider has **decreased** their confidence in connecting with their community;
- Finally, 66% agree that 'the program (ParentsNext) has increased stigma and I feel different when using community services'. Only 18% disagree with this statement.

These factors are critical ones to be further explored and indeed, if replicated in a larger respondent base, would justify an immediate closure or suspension of the program. There are two things that are particularly alarming about these figures. Firstly, international evidence shows that increasing inequality is a significant social determinant of poor health and thus, combined with the fact that these are in some part at least, vulnerable and disadvantaged families, the figures suggest an unhealthy public policy response. Secondly, care of these vulnerable and disadvantaged families is being vested in providers, many of whom are commercial employment providers without the skills to appropriately address vulnerability and even when the provider does have such skills, the program sometimes restricts free use of these. We hope other researchers will look closely at these questions.

The survey numbers are quite small and the numbers of respondents who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, have a disability or English is not their first language, are even smaller. Nevertheless, their responses are vital to consider.

Removing those for whom the questions are not applicable, we find that:

- Only 7% of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander respondents agreed that services suggested culturally appropriate activities and employed Indigenous case workers. 50% disagreed.
- 67% of those for whom English is not their first language remained neutral on the proposition that their ParentsNext provider has the skills to assist them, with 22% agreeing they did and 22% disagreeing.
- Among the respondents for whom disability was relevant, a shocking 67% disagreed with the proposition that their needs and access were understood and included in their service.

Of the total number of participants, 48% were affected by domestic violence. Of these, 66% disagreed with the proposition that 'the provider demonstrated knowledge, awareness and sensitivity regarding your safety and needs'. A further 28% remained neutral on this proposition while 19% agreed.

Around the country, single parents are the clear majority of ParentsNext participants. Awareness of the demands of sole parenting might therefore reasonably be a required core competency. However, 68% felt their provider did not demonstrate such awareness, 13% remained neutral and only 11% agreed such awareness was provided. Figures for provider awareness of the limitations and effects of financial hardship are similarly depressing, with 72% disagreeing their provider displays any such awareness.

A suggestion that an 'emoji – rate my service' function might be helpful rated some interest (33%) but with 37% neutral, it may be that such functionality is not yet understood by participants.

Selected comments on the statements above:

“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!!”

“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”

C. Child Wellbeing - experience with ParentsNext program (answered by 83)

1. ParentsNext has not introduced my child to new activities as we were already attending or planned to attend the activities.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 24% | 41% | 18% | 4% | 5% | 8% |

2. ParentsNext has assisted me to introduce my child to new activities

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 19% | 1% | 4% | 6% | 22% | 48% |

3. ParentsNext activities for my child are not suitable but I attend to maintain my payment.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 42% | 17% | 20% | 14% | 1% | 5% |

4. ParentsNext has had a negative impact on my child but I attend to maintain my payment.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 31% | 23% | 18% | 19% | 2% | 6% |

5. ParentsNext has had a positive impact on my child.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 22% | 2% | 1% | 13% | 20% | 41% |

Discussion

There has always been an uneasy settling of parenting and child activities being positioned alongside education and employment preparation options. The questions above suggest, however briefly, that children are not benefitting in the ParentsNext program.

- 78% of those for whom it is an applicable statement agree that ParentsNext has not introduced their child to new activities as they were already attending or planned to attend.
- 78% disagreed with the statement that ‘ParentsNext has had a positive impact on my child’.
- 59% agreed that ‘ParentsNext has had a negative impact on my child but I attend to maintain my payment.’

We would welcome child welfare experts delving further into these sorts of questions and analysing the impact of compulsory participation in ParentsNext on the well-being children.

No room was provided for comments on this question.

D. Personal Wellbeing – experience with ParentsNext program (answered by 83)

Some discussion on the following figures is provided below the tables.

1. ParentsNext has increased my knowledge and parenting confidence.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 7% | 0% | 2% | 4% | 19% | 67% |

2. ParentsNext has reduced my knowledge and parenting confidence.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 14% | 19% | 23% | 22% | 11% | 11% |

3. ParentsNext has added a cost burden to our family (attending appointments & activities).

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 5% | 47% | 25% | 11% | 4% | 8% |

4. ParentsNext has provided me with financial assistance to attend the activities.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 10% | 0% | 1% | 2% | 23% | 64% |

5. ParentsNext has added additional stresses.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 1% | 77% | 14% | 1% | 0% | 6% |

6. ParentsNext has assisted me to build 'job ready' confidence and skills.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 4% | 1% | 2% | 5% | 20% | 67% |

7. ParentsNext has assisted me to think about a career path.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 5% | 0% | 4% | 7% | 22% | 63% |

8. ParentsNext has not had any positive effect as the activities were already undertaken or planned to be undertaken.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 8% | 64% | 16% | 8% | 2% | 1% |

9. ParentsNext is not appropriate because the child/ren are too young.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 24% | 35% | 6% | 20% | 8% | 6% |

10. ParentsNext is not appropriate because my child/ren have additional parenting needs.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 32% | 34% | 12% | 8% | 11% | 4% |

11. ParentsNext is not appropriate because my family has safety and or domestic violence concerns.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 39% | 24% | 6% | 14% | 11% | 6% |

12. I would prefer to reside in an area where there is no ParentsNext.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 6% | 63% | 13% | 14% | 1% | 2% |

13. I am pleased that I live in a location that has ParentsNext.

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 2% | 4% | 2% | 11% | 22% | 59% |

Discussion

This section uses several statements with opposite meaning as a means of double-checking the accuracy of respondent intentions. Using this method we can see that:

- 2% agree with the notion that ParentsNext had increased their knowledge and parenting confidence, while 86% disagree. 42% agree that ParentsNext has reduced their confidence and parenting decision making.
- 76% would prefer to reside in an area where there is no ParentsNext and only 6% are pleased they live in a location that has ParentsNext.

In other issues, a quick summary shows that:

- 72% of respondents feel ParentsNext has added a cost burden to their already stretched budget
- Only one person said ParentsNext provided them with financial assistance to attend activities
- 91% said ParentsNext added additional stressors to their lives
- 87% disagreed with the proposition that ParentsNext assisted them to build job ready confidence and skills
- 3 people said it had assisted them to think about a career path
- 80% indicated they were already doing or planning to do the activities approved by ParentsNext.

Selected comments on this question:

“ParentsNext has not helped me be job ready. I was asked to complete a survey regarding my strengths and skills etc., on a scale from 1 to 10 with 10 being confident. In those questions I gave myself a 10. My provider changed them to an 8, so I could show improvement in my next survey in 6 months’ time. How does this help me get a job? Making my abilities and skills seem less than they are?? I already have a Cert 3 in admin, yet in my survey my computer skills are shown as needing improvement, which is false!”

“The ParentsNext program sounds fantastic when you read about it. The problem is the provider does 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.

I feel like a prisoner and no one cares for me and my children. I feel even more trapped now, as it feels like all efforts I take are not good enough and no one seems to understand that the children need to come first. It's scary enough to consider how I'm going to juggle all these working and studying commitments whilst also raising the children alone without family support. This provider has made those fears 100 times worse. I feel much more pressure now. I also feel like I am a loser. I've cried many times

since I was forced to start. I feel filthy and disgusting being a dole bludger. My heart is destroyed. I did not need to be attacked, I needed to be heard and understood."

"The added stress of having to attend Rhyme Time weekly with my daughter who is quite overwhelmed with the other children running around and being disruptive is ridiculous!! I have chronic pain conditions and have to sit on a hard wooden step for half an hour whilst I watch other women on their phones and their children running wild in a library!! My girl gets better support at my mother's group catch ups!"

"I have never had to report to Centrelink. Now I have to report fortnightly to Centrelink, and weekly to somewhere else regarding my parents next activity (don't know where I do that) AND print a 3 page form and post (no free post) to Centrelink fortnightly. It's a pain in the bum and all it achieves it me saying nothing's changed. It stresses me out. I've also had to make 2 phone calls to Centrelink and one to parents next as things hadn't been explained properly and now I have another problem so I'll need to call again on Monday."

"I was already studying full time yet made to attend parents next 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."

E. If you were to design a program that would best suit you what would it look like?
(Answered by 84)

1. **The current ParentsNext program.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 2% | 2% | 0% | 4% | 17% | 75% |

2. **A voluntary ParentsNext program that does not have penalties.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 1% | 57% | 24% | 5% | 5% | 8% |

3. **No program but access to funds to undertake my chosen activities.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 2% | 51% | 33% | 5% | 5% | 5% |

4. **Career advice and support**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 1% | 57% | 30% | 8% | 2% | 1% |

5. **My planning for the future is best left to me.**

| N/A | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 0% | 62% | 19% | 14% | 4% | 1% |

Comments on this question:

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

“The current program is ok however providers need more flexibility with regard 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.”

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

“Instead of paying providers to get rich on private sector profits and corrupt kickbacks, redirect the funds directly to a parent who is studying. Tertiary fees are now cost prohibitive and even with student loans, my concern is taking on \$100k debt for a degree. This debt will be lost from my estate when I die and my children who have lived a life in poverty will then inherit nothing because of student debt. Pay parents a super contribution instead of funding lazy, pointless, profit making job network/ParentsNext providers. Also:

- *Extend hours of childcare centres so working parents who are expected to stay at their desk until 6 can actually pick up children. Eliminate discrimination for parents (mothers) at work.*
- *I have left 2 jobs because of the unfair impact on my children, and my inability to meet their needs (eg insufficient sick leave/holiday leave for a mother with kids in most jobs annual allocation)*

- *Make fathers accountable for their role. They have rights to access, but no material obligation to contribute. I know plenty of women who are getting \$7 a week child support. That's not accountability."*

"Should the Parents next 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 in addition. They should also have a stronger networking base with employers who are empathetic to the struggles of working and parenting and can provide a flexible working arrangements for single parents who would like to work."

"Help is fantastic. 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 child care etc. and have now been signed up to this ParentsNext program. It is aggressive and demeaning. I have to stay in contact with the most toxic person I have met (child's father) and the stress that it causes is not fun. Living on \$19,000 had not been for my enjoyment but I have done that so that my daughter got the attention she deserved in her formative years (this is from my education and previous work in early childhood). 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 required no help whatsoever to get back into it. Make people feel confident not like they are shit and begging."

*"There's no help being offered here. It is not about supporting our individual needs, it is about complying. Not one word of help has been offered even though I was looking forward to the help and thought finally there was a breakthrough and finally society were understanding of how hard it is to raise children alone whilst also working and studying, but it was just a nasty trick to hurt us more and keep rewarding those same abusers who have been abusing the unemployed for years. **When I was a teenager and homeless for the first time the Salvation Army social worker helped me. She was amazing, she helped me turn my life around, get a home, and find a course which I got work from. This ParentsNext provider was a heartless sales woman. Spoke in a rough, harsh voice. Had a no nonsense and no excuses approach. No compassion or empathy for anything. She may as well have said 'get off your arse you lazy cow! You need to do more to prove you're not a dole bludger!' She's even commented on a client having 8 children with different fathers which I found disturbing and judgmental. Not to mention having nothing to do with me. The person was mean and rude and threatening."***

"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."

"I'm already enrolled in university, I have planned for my future. ParentsNext have informed me they can assist with additional expenses I may face during my study, I told them my only additional expenses at the moment are textbooks, they told me they don't pay for them. Essentially they can offer me nothing."

Additional comments:

"I know the privacy statement is not mandatory but the manager told me I HAD to sign it or they couldn't sign me up to their ParentsNext program as not signing they couldn't help me get access to programs and I was going to be referred back to Centrelink if I refused to sign so I told them and 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 demit point"

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

"According to Article 23 of the Declaration of Human Rights, 'Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration'. When will the work of mothers be fairly recognised and compensated?"

"Ultimately 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 parent's 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."

*"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 at the soonest opportunity. I am currently seeking diagnosis for my son, who I believe has additional needs. To be forced into community involvement, even with my son's needs known, is not helping me. It takes time away from my son's daily routine, and it forces him to participate in social situations where he is visibly distressed. Even though I have begun job seeking, and plan to study at University in a month, these are not recognised as 'approved activities'. **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.** ParentsNext is nothing more than a manipulative conscription that aims to blame victims of a poor system rather than fixing the system itself."*

"The providers do not want to have a conversation they want to tell you what to do, it's an abusive manipulation people that are out of violent relationships don't need. Being spoken down to, spoken over the top of, not listened to at all, while still being expected to support a family with mental health issues and attend extra activities."

"Fortnightly reporting on my casual employment was working well for myself and children. ParentsNext has created unnecessary stress and I feel like a puppet on a string just for a payment! ParentsNext does not take into account the past 20 years of employment (paying tax) before being stabbed by my ex-husband while 6 months pregnant. I thinking I'm doing a great job being a single mum, working causally and healing. But no! ParentsNext has illustrated my flaws, PTSD, insecurities, only to dangle a carrot (payment) in front of me if I don't do their dance!"

*"I feel that now there is more stress to my life, as there are some activities I take my daughter too, but with ParentsNext it is not looked at as an activity. We do so much together, adding more makes it so hard. Now we are busy 5 days a week, there is not one day where we can be home to relax and spend one on one time together. We do many activities at home. **I feel the ParentsNext program is adding more financial stress to being a single mum.** I am happy to take her to activities but also a child needs to be able to have a time where they can be home. The first 5 years are very important and they go too fast as it is."*

"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."

"My activity is to look at doing a TAFE course except I was told there is no funding available for one."

"Seems I'm lucky I have a good provider even though they don't have the funding to help me the way I need to be helped."

"I agree & understand there needs to be a system but not one like this that penalises & puts so much added stress on parents who are already doing the right thing!"

"The ParentsNext program is completely flawed, discriminatory, unfair, demanding, confusing, disrespectful, and adds stress and worry to parents who are already struggling financially/emotionally/time-wise. It threatens the right for Australian parents to access funds and services in order to stay home and raise their children. The program is poorly designed, confusing to understand and the reasons and requirements are not properly explained. It adds nothing but grief for parents, but especially those in my position who are mature and responsible enough to think and plan ahead for the future. It basically dismisses our independence and puts unnecessary and unrealistic demands on people who are already stretched too thin trying to do the best they can. I'm a single parent of a 4 year old autistic child, caring for my son 100% of the time, whilst studying at uni full time trying to complete my degree, and on top of that I manage (clinically diagnosed) depression and anxiety disorders. Even though I'm facing all this, and am in financial hardship, living week-to-week until I complete my uni degree, ParentsNext is still demanded that I jump through the ridiculous hoops of its program which for me personally is a complete waste of time. And if I miss one reporting date due to my already beyond chaotic schedule, my payment gets stopped. This is unfair and it demeans and degrades everything I'm trying to do for myself and my son's future."

"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 subject nature involved, or the fact that it is inappropriate to discuss in front of or within hearing distance of my children. A lot of the questioning is completely irrelevant, and none of the staff seem to have any knowledge of the family court system or domestic violence issues."

“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 have not been offered anything by ParentsNext. As soon as she realised I was a student, she filled all the paperwork in herself. She told me my short-term goal is to finish my current bachelor degree and my long term goal is to get a job in that field. She knew nothing about me. She doesn't know that I have major depression, bipolar, a personality disorder and anorexia. She doesn't know I have PCOS, Gastro Oesophageal Reflux Disorder, Insulin Resistance and a dysfunctional autonomic nervous system. She doesn't know I am struggling to survive financially. She doesn't even know that I'm actively looking for work at the moment! She doesn't know that I don't want my photo or name published in the media because I was subjected to DV in my relationship and I'm scared of my ex knowing I'm in this program. I asked her to help me do a resume and I felt like I was really ruining her day. She told me they would help me at my next appointment (in a month!) I asked if I could get an appointment to have it done sooner, so she sent me a form to fill out at home. She wanted my next appointment to be while I'm supposed to be on work placement. She told me it won't take long and to just quickly answer the phone. Sorry, this is work experience in a hospital! I could be elbow deep in poo, or washing a patient. I can't just drop everything and answer a phone call to confirm I'm complying with ParentsNext. I've been studying for 2.5 years now, I feel like I've so far been doing an ok job. I would love some help to find a job, but Alas, I wasn't actually offered any help. **The building for ParentsNext is also up a steep flight of stairs, which is CRAZY given the clientele is women with children under the age of 6!** This appointment was made for me in December, I've waited all this time for this appointment, full of anxiety, to be offered absolutely nothing. I cried all the way home.”*

“I'm yet to discover any advantage. I was asked for a long term goal. I said to actually make money from making cakes. She typed it in. I said, you realise that's not actually realistic. She replied, that's fine, it's only a goal.”