

**Submission to the Select Committee on Workforce Australia
Employment Services**

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Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee's inquiry into ParentsNext. My submission will focus on identifying the impact of compulsory participation and funding and service delivery arrangements on program effectiveness; that is, the extent to which the program is likely to achieve its policy objective of helping parents in receipt of Parenting Payments who haven't worked in the last six months and whose children are aged 9 months to 6 years develop study and work goals.

The program design assumes that the policy objective will be met if eligible parents participate in certain activities which may include:

- going to quarterly appointments with your provider;
- taking part in set activities;
- agreeing to a Participant Plan (servicesaustralia.gov.au).

Developing study and work goals if you are in your early twenties and have the responsibility for looking after a small child will take time, and the most critical element in that process is developing an effective Participation Plan; that is, a plan that sets out a realistic series of steps that will increase the likelihood of participants achieving their study and work goals.

Effective participant plans are developed through meaningful collaboration between participants and service provider staff. For meaningful collaboration to occur, participants have to trust service provider staff enough to feel comfortable talking about what they really want to do, and the barriers they face in achieving their goals (Nevile & Long 2015:46; Nevile 2009:78 & 83).

This is where the issue of compulsory participation and funding and service delivery arrangements come in. I will address each of these issues in turn.

Compulsory participation

The ParentsNext program would be more likely to achieve its policy objectives if compulsory participation was not linked to punitive benefit sanctions. I note that under current arrangements, participants are urged to contact their service provider if they are unable to meet a participation requirement. It is then up to the service provider to decide whether the participant's explanation is reasonable, in which case the participants stays in the green zone, or the participants explanation is unreasonable, in which case the participant moves to the warning zone, or the penalty zone where financial penalties apply. Requiring service providers to make decisions about the reasonableness of a participant's explanation puts service provides in a position of power over participants, which makes it less likely that participants will feel comfortable engaging in the sort of honest discussions that are necessary for the development of effective Participant Plans.

Repeated failure to meet participation requirements would suggest that the participant does not believe the activities in the Participant Plan will help them achieve their study and work goals, or the barriers they face in meeting their participation requirements are greater than originally identified.

From my research it is clear that service users are happy to participate in program activities if they can see the value of participation. In other words, if participation brings with it things that they value. (Nevile 2013a:151-152; Nevile 2009:87; Nevile 2008:9; Nevile& Nevile 2003:138).

I believe it is better to design a program which maximises opportunities for participants to get value from the program, rather than embedding structural constraints which reduce the likelihood of the program achieving policy goals.

Funding and service delivery arrangements

I have no first hand knowledge of the funding and service delivery arrangements for ParentsNext. However, what I can say based on past research, is that the collaborative process necessary for developing effective Participant Plans takes time – it is highly unlikely that this can be done in one initial face-to-face meeting.

My clients respond to being treated with respect because this is one of the few places they're actually going to get it. If I'm going to make someone believe that they can do something, that takes time and it also requires me listening to them and them knowing that (Employment consultant, metropolitan agency quoted in Neville 2013b:74).

If the funding arrangements do not allow service providers time to get to know their clients and develop of a relationship of trust, then the Participant Planning process will most likely be a process where participants are presented with a pre-determined range of activities and asked to choose activities from that pre-determined list.

Funding arrangements also affect the efficacy of the program in addressing structural and cultural barriers to accessing family support, education and employment, in that service providers need to be able to attract and retain staff who have the skills and knowledge to help participants in culturally appropriate ways.

Given the causal connections outlined above, I would recommend the following core design principles underpin the design of any new, or revised, program.

- 1. Funding allows service providers to attract and retain appropriately skilled staff.**
- 2. Funding allows service providers to undertake outreach activities designed to encourage parents to participate in ParentsNext activities.**
- 3. Engagement with ParentsNext is seen as a gradual process.** For example, eligible participants are encouraged to participate in regular

activities once their child turns two. The activities are designed and run by ParentsNext staff and parents in the local area who have been participants in ParentsNext and have had a positive experience, or who have links with other local community services.

Once their child turns three, participants are encouraged to start thinking about their study and work goals and having discussions with ParentsNext staff about their study and work goals. The process of developing a Participation Plan that identifies study and/or work goals; barriers to achieving study and work goals; and a realistic set of activities that address identified barriers and increase the likelihood of the participant achieving their study and/or work goals would take a year.

Participants then undertake the activities set out in their Participant Plan and are encouraged to continue to meet with ParentsNext staff to talk about how things are going, and celebrate with staff and other participants when they complete one of the activities identified in their Plan.

4. Funding allows service providers to engage more intensively with participants who are reluctant to develop a Participation Plan and/or carry out the activities in the Plan, rather than imposing financial penalties on participants.

References

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