



New voluntary service for parents

What we've heard from parents

Thank you to all the parents who have joined in the consultations between June 2023 and September 2023 and shared their knowledge and insights. This advice will help shape the design of the new voluntary pre-employment service to support parents with young children to meet their education and employment goals.

We'll keep talking with parents as we design the new service together. In the meantime, here's what parents from across Australia have told us so far, both directly and through partnering organisations.

Please let us know if we've missed anything important, misunderstood what we've heard, or placed the wrong emphasis on what you told us.

You can share your comments with us directly or through the organisation that contacted you. Email us at ParentsConsultation@dewr.gov.au or visit <https://www.dewr.gov.au/consultation-new-voluntary-parent-support-service> to use the online form.

What parents told us

Parents' priorities

The consultations confirmed the **priority for parents is raising their children**. Parents aspire to pursue education and employment goals when they're ready and able. Their immediate focus is to provide a **safe, loving, healthy, stable and financially secure environment** for their children and family.

Parents' needs

Parents spoke of the **complex and varied challenges** they need to navigate before they can focus on education and employment goals.

- Parents said that **childcare costs and availability** is a key challenge. This includes short-term childcare, like for 2 to 3 hours in an emergency or to go to an appointment. Parents, particularly

young parents and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds said a significant barrier was trust in the quality and cultural appropriateness of care being provided.

- Parents spoke of their **many challenges**, including insecure housing, financial distress, domestic violence, language barriers, illness, complex caring roles, and lack of access to transport. Other significant challenges for young parents related to poor mental health, social isolation, the stigma associated with being a young parent and the fear of children being removed.
- Parents told us travelling to appointments or engaging in work was a challenge **if they don't have a driver licence**. The cost and time to get their full licence, and to gain experience to drive with confidence in high-traffic areas, is a barrier.
- Parents talked about the **costs and difficulties of using public transport**. Especially if there are limited options and they need to get somewhere quickly in an emergency. Parents with more than one child, or children with a disability, often found public transport even more challenging.
- Some parents – especially migrant and refugee parents – spoke of their challenges to learn **language and computer skills**. They need these skills to access study and other supports, or set up their own business. They need someone to help them navigate systems and online services.

Access to the service

Parents spoke about the new voluntary service being **accessible to all parents** who need help to plan for their future education and employment goals.

- Many parents felt the service should **prioritise** parents who have higher needs for support. Like parents who are young (14 to 24 years of age), single, first-time parents, living in poverty or experiencing domestic and family violence. Also, parents who care for a child or children with disability, First Nations parents and migrant or refugee parents.
- Parents agree the service **should not be limited to parents receiving Parenting Payment**.
- Feedback **varied** on when the best time to access the service would be. Many parents mentioned **this should be based on the individual**. Some parents said it would be **when their youngest child was about 3 years of age**.
- Many parents noted there were **differences in children's development** which must be considered, such as children with disability or neurodiversity. Some parents also noted that people have different capabilities and ability to manage both their work and personal lives.

Supportive and knowledgeable staff

Most parents did not express a strong preference for who should deliver the service. Although, many favoured community-led services. What mattered most to parents was that the staff who deliver the service are **respectful, qualified, empathetic, and have lived experience** to help parents connect

with the supports they need to reach their goals. Parents said that the nature of the support provided was key in the outcomes that they were able to achieve.

- Parents would like **one key contact at the service**. This would mean they don't have to retell their personal – and often traumatic – stories.
- Parents wanted staff who were reliable and followed through on doing things that they said they would do, and in agreed timelines. This was important given this was the expectation on them.
- Parents would like this relationship with staff to be one of a **mentor or life coach**.
- Parents may feel embarrassed or judged when they need to ask for support. They'd appreciate staff **offering services proactively**. It's important these services are offered in a way that is empathetic and non-judgemental.
- Parents want to build a **trust-based relationship** with staff. They want staff who walk alongside them to **guide, encourage and support** them on their journey to achieve their goals.
- Parents recommended staff be **available when they need them** through an easily accessible channel. They want staff to persist with checking-in with them in a gentle and compassionate way to remind them about what support is available.
- It is important to parents that services are **culturally appropriate**. This includes services for First Nations, refugee and migrant parents.
- Some parents **feel more comfortable accessing a service delivered by a First Nations organisation**. However, they emphasised that there **should not be a separate service** for First Nations people.

Choice of how to engage

Parents want to be able to **make informed choices** and need to **know what they're committing to**. They want to know what the service offers, how it's offered, what it requires of them and how it will help them.

- Parents told us the service should use a **mix of delivery methods**. They'd like a choice of in-person, online, virtual and over the phone (with the caller ID clearly identifiable, not a hidden private number).
- Some parents pointed out that the department's **free-call phone numbers are not free from mobile phones**. This means extra costs for parents who don't have a landline. These parents would appreciate other ways to make contact when they don't have phone credit. Parents note long waiting times to speak to someone (as long as 3 hours).
- Parents wanted to **choose how to engage** based on their circumstances at the time. This includes being able to negotiate for suitable appointment times, as opposed to being told of an appointment time.

- The service should meet parents where they already are: playgroups, schools, health services, community hubs and the like.
- Parents find it **difficult to keep their children entertained for long periods when attending appointments**. They would welcome shorter appointments.
- Spaces where parents come to should be welcoming and culturally safe – not fluoro-lit offices with big tables and hard plastic chairs.
- Parents want support services to **offer privacy** (not open plan offices), have **child friendly spaces** and give parents the **option to bring their children to appointments**
- Parents want to have **access to community and peer support groups** with people like themselves or who have similar experiences. Don't forget single dads in this.
- Parents acknowledged that there is a **lack of services and a lack of acknowledgement of dads** and that the new service needs to support all parents.
- Parents would like the **ability to provide feedback**. They want a trusted and confidential path to raise concerns and advise opportunities for improvement, which would not compromise their payment.

Financial supports

Parents had differing views about the types of incentives that would encourage them to engage in the new voluntary service.

- Parents saw their **children and family as the main reason to participate**. This is the inherent incentive to create a positive environment and future for their children and families.
- Parents commonly suggested that **financial and other supports** would be useful incentives to help them attend initial and ongoing appointments. These included assistance with childcare availability and cost, transport costs (including petrol), rent, groceries and study fees.
- Parents also said a good incentive would be **helping to pay costs related to achieving their goals**. For example, a driver licence (including driving lessons), a laptop, mobile phones and data bundles, appropriate clothes for interviews or work, training courses and kids' school needs.
- Parents proposed **incentives for achieving milestones** along the way to achieving their goal.
- Parents told us that there is a **disincentive to working** when small changes in their income from paid employment can affect other forms of support. For example, housing, Centrelink payments, access to a Health Care Card and more. This can also increase costs like childcare, leading to more financial hardship.

Flexibility

Parents said **the service must be flexible**. It must allow them to engage when the time is right for them and their children. This means being able to opt in and out, or to pause participation to suit unpredictable family life.

- Parents pointed out that **caring responsibilities and priorities can change quickly**. They want to be able to communicate about and negotiate changes, like appointment times, in **reasonable and flexible timeframes**.
- The service should **meet parents 'where they are at'**. Their ability to participate varies. It can also change from day to day, depending on their circumstances and responsibilities.
- Parents said they had difficulty finding employers who are **flexible in accommodating certain hours for parents**, like between 9:00 am and 2:00 pm.
- Parents said they see a need to **promote the benefits of hiring parents to employers**. This includes hiring staff with practical, cultural knowledge relevant to the business' clients.
- Parents were concerned that employers may see them as unreliable for sometimes having to unexpectedly leave work to take care of their children. They want employers to be **flexible and understanding**. This includes **supporting cultural needs** and responsibilities.

Location of services

Parents need the service, especially in-person services, to consider **location-based challenges**.

- Parents' **experiences differed depending on their location**, whether rural, regional or metro. Location-based challenges included limited availability of services and training courses in some towns, accessibility issues in busy city areas, and different employment opportunities and public transport options depending on locations.
- Many parents said they had **difficulties finding meaningful employment**, with jobs only becoming available when someone leaves. Apart from online study, there were also **limited local training and education** opportunities aligned to their aspirations.
- Parents saw benefits in **multiple services provided at the same location**, like in a community hub. This has the benefit of offering anonymity, so not everyone in town knows what services a parent is there for, which can cause embarrassment.
- Parents stressed the importance of the service being able to make **intentional, place-based connections** to ensure referrals to services are accessible and helpful.

Awareness and promotion of services

Parents want **transparency, and clear communication** about the services that are available.

- Parents want to know about **available supports** as early as possible, even if they come back to it later.
- Some parents want **promotional information** in a written format they can refer to, like a brochure, while others want to **access information online**. Promotion via different social media platforms was seen to be particularly important to 'reach'.
- Parents want information to be accessible and available through channels that will reach them. This should also consider parents from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.
- Parents want to hear about **the benefits and expectations** of the new service throughout the wider community to increase awareness and engagement.
- Before they try the new service, parents want to hear **success stories** and **reviews from other parents** who have engaged with the service.
- Parents saw an **online hub** of relevant services and supports as helpful, with help from someone to navigate it available where needed.

Contact for more information

Contact the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations to share your views about this document.

- Email ParentsConsultation@dewr.gov.au
- Use the online form on our website's consultation page.

For more information, visit <https://www.dewr.gov.au/consultation-new-voluntary-parent-support-service>