

## ***ParentsNext* was meant to help single mothers go back to work. Instead it feels like a new abusive relationship**

*Katherine Curchin*

The punitive turn the welfare program took in 2018 has had alarming effects



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*ParentsNext* is hurting parents. Designed to prepare disadvantaged parents to get back into the workforce, this compulsory program is making parents feel undervalued and anxious.

The aims of this government-funded program are laudable: to make it easier for mothers, and especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers, to participate in the labour market.

While many participants have valued the support *ParentsNext* has given them to get back into the workforce, the punitive turn *ParentsNext* took in 2018 has had alarming effects. That was the year the targeted compliance framework (TCF) – a system for threatening people with financial punishments – was incorporated into *ParentsNext*.

Participants in the program have to sign a participation plan setting out the steps they are taking to get ready for employment. They can then be compelled to report fortnightly to confirm they are sticking with their plan.

If they miss a reporting deadline, their payment can be suspended by the automated system. The onus is on the parent to prove they had a reasonable excuse. Meanwhile, kids can go hungry and rental payments are missed.

While many of the organisations contracted by the government to provide *ParentsNext* are well-intentioned and have good reputations for helping disadvantaged families, this policy is creating too much distress.

Not-for-profits delivering the program are asking for it to be changed. They say the complicated reporting regime doesn't work for sleep-deprived people dealing with the messy, unpredictable life of caring for little kids. Some people on the program have babies as young as nine months.

The TCF is designed to work its behavioural magic by making people on income support feel the constant threat of losing their income if they put a foot wrong. The mere threat is enough to ensure compliance: while many people have their payments unexpectedly delayed, very few people actually have had their payments completely cut.

But the anxiety this system produces is something we need to talk about. Internationally the evidence shows that for those struggling with mental health issues, programs that produce this level of insecurity and stress are counterproductive.

Tellingly, parents have reported that during the period in 2020 when *ParentsNext* activity and reporting requirements were suspended due to Covid-19, their anxiety levels dropped and their hopefulness improved.

The program is also deliberately targeted towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents. They are disproportionately bearing the brunt of this punitive system. Human rights lawyers argue it is racially discriminatory.

A large proportion of women in the program are survivors of domestic violence. This reflects the reality that Australia has an ongoing domestic violence problem and that such violence often causes economic harm.

People trying to rebuild their lives after fleeing an abusive relationship deserve support from people they can trust. But survivors say that *ParentsNext* can itself feel like a new abusive relationship, in which providers can scrutinise their personal life, make unreasonable demands, and control them by threatening to withhold money.

In theory the program gives highly disadvantaged mothers an opportunity to voice their own goals for the future. When the program works well it helps connect socially isolated parents with valuable training or childcare.

But in practice some parents are being intimidated by program providers who have the power to cut off the income they rely on to meet basic needs. Faced with a huge power imbalance, they agree to things they know are not in their family's best interests.

The Submissions prepared for the current Parliamentary Inquiry into *ParentsNext* contains participants offering examples of being forced to do things that did not fit the needs of their families including:

- being forced to do a course when they needed to instead give their time to meeting the urgent needs of their disabled child
- wasting time and money on attending unhelpful meetings
- mothers who have experienced violence being forced to recount this violence within hearing of their child or children.

Social housing rescued me when I fled domestic violence in 1970s Australia. That safety net has long gone

When engaging with mutual obligation requirements gets too stressful, some people respond by withdrawing from government services and end up destitute, homeless or returning to their abuser.

This policy which was meant to help parents plan for the future has gone badly awry. Since the national rollout in July 2018, various minor improvements – such as SMS reminders of appointments – have been made to address some of the unintended effects of the program.

But these changes haven't gone far enough. Parents work hard to care for their children and they deserve help, not hassle. The government needs to replace this punitive program with a trauma-informed program before it does any more harm.

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