



DEEWR Innovation Fund Project
Parent Mentoring Project
Project Summary



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About the Project

About the DEEWR Innovation Fund Grant

The Innovation Fund is a competitive grants program designed to address the needs of the most disadvantaged job seekers through funding projects that foster innovative solutions to overcome barriers to employment which these job seekers face. These groups include, but are not limited to, people in areas with entrenched disadvantage, the homeless and those at risk of homelessness, people with mental health conditions, Indigenous Australians, and job seekers in jobless families.

A panel of organisations was appointed to deliver Innovation Fund projects based on selection criteria in the Request for Tender for Employment Services 2009-12.

In order to receive funding from the Innovation Fund, organisations need to be a member of the Innovation Fund panel.

About Work Savvy Parents

Work Savvy Parents is privately owned organisation that specialises in the delivery of employment and training programs aimed at assisting Jobless Families, particularly mothers, in their return to work.

Work Savvy Parents was established in 2006 to provide programs to support parents with participation requirements in their 'return to work journey'. Our workshop series, "Balancing Families and Careers" was delivered in partnership with Job Network (and later Job Services Australia) organisations throughout Australia. Our programs are also offered to community based organisations who are able to fund programs assisting parents in their return to work. We have worked in partnership with Corporates, including Subaru Australia, in the delivery of workshops and programs aimed at parents within the general community who are planning to return to work after full-time parenting roles.

Work Savvy Parents has also delivered professional development programs to the Employment Services sector to assist front-line staff who are working with Jobless Families by providing them with strategies to better service this client group.

We have a Registered Training Organisation (RTO), Work Savvy Training, which specialises in Employment Services Staff Training and Job Seeker Training.

About the "Parent Mentoring Program"

The Parent Mentoring Program (PMP) focussed on helping job seekers from jobless families to achieve employment and employment related training outcomes. This was achieved through a life coaching model where participants would be coached by experienced employment/life coaching consultants who would address each participant's specific needs, help them overcome barriers, and work on employment options with the candidate, on a day to day basis. This approach was aimed at being innovative and providing participants with an end to end coach to guide them through each and every step of their journey toward employment including:

- A 12-Day Intensive Return to Work Workshop program that addressed specific issues, concerns and barriers faced by Jobless Families, particularly principal carer parents who had been out of the workforce for extended periods
- A style "Make-Over" which included a new interview outfit, hairstyling, make-up application and presentation workshop (this was included in the 12 Day program)
- Life Coaching sessions with a qualified Life Coach
- Ongoing support and job search assistance from a PMP Mentor
- Interview preparation and support
- Reverse Marketing and connection with employers
- Post placement visits support that focussed on work/life balance



At the beginning of the program, participants were to complete a 12 Day Intensive Return to Work program (titled “Balancing Family and Career”) that provided answers to the questions being asked by job seekers from jobless families, and provided realistic strategies that would equip disadvantaged parents to make the transition to work possible and successful. Upon completion of the program an action plan was to be devised with the consultant that focussed on helping the participant return to work. This plan was to involve isolation of desired job roles, planning education requirements if any, and organising child care and planning for effective work/life balance.

The coach was to keep in touch with the participant throughout the entire length of the program, until an employment or education outcome has been reached. The coach was to address social and employment barriers and maintain contact with participant and where relevant the employer, to ensure any problems are addressed immediately and effectively.

The project was focussed primarily on isolating and overcoming barriers to employment by the most disadvantaged of job seekers. Our assessment process was to focus as much on social barriers as employment barriers, including, but not limited to, lack of workforce experience, housing problems, lack of transport, poor social or family networks, domestic violence or other family or relationship issues, lack of education and lack of current work skills.

The program was designed to specifically target parents from Jobless Families from Western & South Western Sydney, and the Logan and Ipswich areas in Brisbane because of the large incidence of disadvantaged jobseekers in those areas. The project was also aimed at target participants from Jobless Families who were Indigenous Australians, people living in areas of entrenched disadvantage, the homeless and those at risk of homelessness and people with mental health conditions.



Structure of Program

12 Day Workshop program

The 12 Day Workshop program was the keystone of the program and provided participants with resources, information and strategies to make a successful transition to work. The workshop directly addressed concerns that many Principal Carer Parents have when returning to work, including loss of Centrelink Benefits, Child Care options and strategies for finding a balance between work and family responsibilities. Some of the topics covered in the workshop program included:

- Employment Income and Centrelink Benefits
- Child Care Issues and Options
- Family v Work – Exploring strategies to establish a healthy Work Life Balance
- Skills Inventory – Employment Skills gained through Parenting
- Job Search Reality Check – Realistic career goal setting based on labour market needs and parenting responsibilities
- Family/Work Contingency Planning – eg planning for sick kids
- Goal setting – work and personal goals
- Confidence and Self Esteem – addressing confidence crisis many parents face when returning to work after a long break
- Resumes for Parents returning to Work – Specialist resumes that highlight skills rather than work history
- Job Search and Interview Skills – Focus on addressing concerns employers may have about work/life balance or lack of recent workforce experience
- DISC Analysis – understanding communication styles and personal strengths and weaknesses
- Employer guest speakers
- Employer / workplace visits
- Community/Family services guest speakers

Style Make-over – Interview Clothing, Hair Styling and Make-up

The 'Style Make-over' was a popular and successful part of the Parent Mentoring Program. We received excellent feedback from participants about what a difference the 'make-overs' made for participants.

Every participant in the program was offered \$100 worth of new interview clothing. Before purchasing this clothing, we held a "Trinny & Susannah" style workshop which provided information on body shape and colours and a group analysis of what type of outfits would be most flattering. Once this information is agreed upon, we shopped for an outfit that fitted the individual shape/colour of the participant.

Every participant was also offered a hair make-over. The format for this program is that we worked with a local hairdresser to provide a cut/colour or cut/style combination for participants. Most participants told us that they gained confidence after their new and updated 'look'. We have had a number of participants who have declined this opportunity, but it has been offered to everyone on the program.

All participants received a BYS Make-up kit which included make-up bag, foundation, blush, eye shadow, mascara, eye-liner, lip stick, lip-liner and brushes. We also provided tuition on how to apply basic make-up and where possible, we secured a make-up artist who provided professional advice. We have had very few men participants, but those who have participated received a grooming kit instead (aftershave, deodorant etc).

We feel this has been an incredibly important part of the process for our participants. We believe that many of the women we work with have had significant self-esteem problems, and this style make-over has really helped to build confidence, particularly in attending job interviews.



Customised mentoring and support

The idea of the program was to provide a tailored follow up to our 12 day program and make-over to ensure that participants were receiving one-on-one support to deal with more complex barriers to employment. This resulted in a huge spectrum of mentoring services which were delivered on an individualised basis. There was no set format for how we mentored our clients, some simply needed an encouraging word on a regular basis, others needed significant support and advocacy services to help them work through major personal crises.

Our mentors kept in regular contact with participants through telephone calls, one-on-one interviews, group programs and even home visits. The degree of support varied depending on the clients needs.

Some examples of the type of support services we offered through our mentoring included:

- Ongoing group work – morning teas, motivational talks, social get together
- Regular telephone contact by our mentors
- One-on-one meetings
- Free accredited training programs (Food Handling, Customer Services)
- Computer Skills training
- Barista Training
- Referral to training providers and support while in training
- Referral and advocacy to community services providers including
 - Mental Health Services
 - Legal Aid
 - Psychology/Counseling Services
 - Domestic Violence Services
 - Drug and Alcohol Services
 - GP's (depression etc)
 - Dept of Housing and other emergency accommodation services
- Negotiating child care and child care fee assistance
- Personal intervention – We have cases where participants ask us to assist them with family issues or children
- Advocacy or just physical support when a participant needs to attend meetings with other organisations (ie Police Station to report Domestic Violence or get AVO) etc
- Advocacy with ESP's or Centrelink
- Meeting for coffee – particularly for those in work (post placement support)
- Visiting participants at the workplace where appropriate
- Accompanying participants when they are cold calling employers, and if required, to job interviews.
- Assisting participants with job applications and job interview preparation

Networking with the community

One of the aims of our program is to provide greater linkages with the community. To ensure that participants are networking with the community we developed networks by

- Providing guest speakers from community organisations including Legal Aid, Training providers, employers, child care providers and community groups servicing parents and women
- Providing participants with a list of local network and support services
- Establishing on-line network groups using Facebook
- Organising social events between participants to help establish new networks (ie Family BBQs)
- Referring clients to support services to help address non-vocational barriers



Life Coaching

Work Savvy Parents contracted a qualified Life Coach to work with the participants of our program in NSW, and to assist us in developing Life Coaching tools and techniques so that all staff on the program could provide quality coaching to participants. Our NSW participants were each offered a minimum of 3 Life Coaching sessions with the Life Coach (more if required).

Those participants who did participate in Life Coaching gave excellent feedback, and many stated it was the most fulfilling part of the program and assisted them to make life changes that positively impacted their personal lives as well as providing motivation in returning to work or training.

Work Experience

Work experience placements were not a compulsory part of our program, but were offered to participants who choose to participate. Many participants were already involved in voluntary activities through their children's schools or through JSA programs. Others have significant work experience already and chose not to participate. Some participants are involved in training or other activities that made work experience not suitable.

Where work experience is an option, we organised placements through a variety of methods

- In some cases we worked with JSA's by sourcing a work experience placement with an employer, and arranging subsidized work trials or utilizing the JSA Work Experience program.
- We worked with volunteer organisations by linking parents to those organisations to take part in volunteer programs to gain work experience
- We have provided a number of work experience placements within our own organisation to provide on-the-job training, particularly in administrative roles. We have even employed participants within our business including two permanent employees who are performing extremely well in their roles.

Action Plans

We developed a standardised action plan document to ensure that all participants had their specific vocational and non-vocational barriers met. The 12 Day program included action plans for participants to report back their individual progress throughout the program. This has worked as a homework plan so that participants put skills learnt during the program into practical action at home.

All participants in the program had an action plan in place to provide goals and achievable tasks that direct them towards sustainable employment or social outcomes.



Commencement of participants into program

Commencement Strategy

Our contract originally stated that we would run 8 intakes with 20 participants in each intake, however we changed our intake process and ultimately ran 13 smaller intakes ranging from 5-24 participants.

The reasons for our change in intake methodology is as follows:

- We simply struggled to get 20 referrals into our intakes. This was due to the following factors;
- Lack of available referrals at the time of intake. Often we would receive referrals after an intake date, and these referrals often ‘fell away’ before the next intake date
- In Brisbane, we worked in partnership with JSAs to deliver exclusive programs on JSA sites. Often these JSA partners were unable to fill a group of 20 eligible participants from their own caseload.
- We found that we had greater success with smaller groups. We believe this is simply because the amount of time spent with participants is greater and the smaller groups are easier to manage
- Smaller groups meant more intakes which meant potential participants had to wait less time before starting the program
- The extra intakes also provided us a greater opportunity to create a ‘footprint’ in the market as we were more often able to accept referrals and be more ‘useful’ to referring JSAs who are seeking immediate programs for the job seekers

Breakdown of Commencements

The Parent Mentoring Program contract was to commence 160 participants. The program actually commenced 168 participants over the course of the contract, exceeding our target by 8 participants.

Intake	Date	Commencements
Western Sydney - Penrith	Oct 2009	16
South West Sydney - Campbelltown	Oct 2009	17
Western Sydney - Penrith	Mar 2010	10
Logan - Woodridge	Mar 2010	8
South West Sydney – Campbelltown	May 2010	24
Ipswich – Goodna	Apr 2010	14
Logan – Browns Plains	May 2010	12
Western Sydney – Penrith	July 2010	12
Ipswich – Goodna	July 2010	11
Ipswich	Aug 2010	12
Western Sydney – Penrith	Oct 2010	18
South West Sydney – Campbelltown	Oct 2010	9
Logan - Woodridge	Nov 2010	5
TOTAL		168

Exits

While we commenced 168 participants into the program, there were a number of participants who only attended part of the initial workshop and did not continue to participate in the mentoring part of the program. There are a variety of reasons for the non-participation in the project which include some of the following:

- Health related issues where participants were given exemptions and no longer were able, or wished to participate



- Some participants moved out of the area and were unable to continue participating because of distance
- A handful of participants simply did not want to complete the program and did not turn up to workshop sessions despite our staff making significant attempts to engage the job seeker.

Where we were unable to continue working with participants, we decided to close files and effectively 'exit' participants from the program.

Our statistical information regarding employment outcomes does not include exited job seekers. We determined not to include these participants as their non-participation made it impossible for us to deliver any kind of assistance or even determine whether the job seeker was ultimately employed.

Recommendations on Commencement Strategies

We found that there was a significant correlation in the ongoing engagement and subsequently outcome rate for intakes that commenced at the end of each year. Intakes that commenced after mid October meant that the 12 Day Workshop Program completed too close to the commencement of the Summer school holidays. By the time we reconnected with participants in the New Year, much of the motivation and enthusiasm that had been established during the workshop program had 'fizzled'. We made efforts to run 'reconnect' workshops with these participants, but often the long break in participation did reflect on the outcome rates for those intakes.

We recommend that programs like this should schedule intakes at the beginning of School Terms, and where possible, at the beginning of calendar years. Parents tend to 'drop out' of any real job search before the school holidays (particularly the Christmas holidays) so there does seem to be real benefit to outcomes and engagement if the program is not interrupted by school holidays.



Employment and Training Outcomes

Final Outcome Statistics at the end of the 18 Month Project

The following outcome statistics represent outcomes recorded before the end of February 2011.

Intake	Participants *	Employment Placement**	%	Educational#	%	Total**	%
Penrith - Intake 1	14	10	71%	2	14%	12	86%
Campbelltown – Intake 2	12	7	58%	3	25%	10	83%
Penrith – Intake 3	10	8	80%	2	20%	10	100%
Woodridge – Intake 4	8	8	100%	0		8	100%
Campbelltown – Intake 5	23	7	30%	8	35%	15	65%
Goodna – Intake 6	11	5	45%	2	18%	7	63%
Browns Plains – Intake 7	10	3	30%	5	50%	8	80%
Penrith – Intake 8	12	8	67%	3	25%	11	92%
Goodna- Intake 9	9	7	78%	0		7	78%
Ipswich – Intake 10	11	4	36%	3	27%	7	64%
Penrith – Intake 11	18	6	33%	2	11%	8	44%
Campbelltown – Intake 12	7	3	43%	3	43%	6	86%
Woodridge – Intake 13	5	3	60%	0		3	60%
TOTAL	150	79	52.66%	33	22%	111	74%

* This figure does not include commencements that exited the program before completing the 12 Day Workshop Program.

* This figure indicates where a participant was placed into employment. There have been a number of cases where people have moved interstate or had serious mental health or medical problems that have resulted in the end of the position.

Some participants have achieved a mixed outcome of both employment and education. Where there is an employment outcome recorded we have NOT included this as an educational outcome also.

Note: Later intakes did not have the same level of mentoring and support due to the contract end. Participants from earlier programs benefited from longer mentoring and job search support which is reflected in the outcome figures. We believe that outcomes rates would have been even higher if the later groups had the benefit of more ongoing support.



Job Seeker Marketing Activities

Over the course of the project, Work Savvy Parents modified its marketing strategies in an effort to find better ways to engage employers and place job seekers into sustainable employment.

Initially, our key strategy was to provide one staff member whose role was to market participants to local employers. This was carried out through identification of potential job roles for each candidate, and then contacting employers in that industry to promote candidates directly. This is best described as 'Reverse Marketing' which has been traditionally used throughout the ES sector. Our Reverse Marketer made hundreds of telephone calls to potential employers and attempted to arrange job interviews or send of resumes to interested employers. Although we had some limited success with this method, we found that the cost of resources did not justify the results we gained through this process.

We decided to utilise our staffing by combining the Mentor and Reverse Marketing roles (with the same number of staff) this helped to ensure that our Job Seeker promotion was more appropriate to the candidate as mentors had a greater understanding of the needs and abilities of each participant. It also helped us to better service participants across regions as we were able to put a specialist mentor in each location (rather than sharing staff across locations – particularly in Sydney).

During the second half of the project we worked on developing stronger relationships with a smaller number local employers. One of our strategies was to invite employers to speak to our groups and become involved in the development of candidates and the program. This strategy ultimately resulted in employer 'buy-in' to our program and a commitment to provide employment opportunities to our participants. We had a number of employers who recruited multiple participants from our program because of these partnerships.

Another benefit in involving employers in the delivery of our program has been in helping parents to identify suitable employment goals. One of the issues we have seen repeatedly is that participants had a habit of identifying retail and hospitality as their desired job choices. These industries often present real problems in the way that employers tend to hire casual staff and put them on a changing roster. Often rostered work days change from week to week which is very disruptive when attempting to arrange child care. Additionally, retailers and hospitality organisations tend to want casuals to work evenings and weekends, the very times that parents are unable to access any child care. We have had representatives of Retail and Hospitality employers visit us and this has often proved to be a very good 'reality check' for participants. Secondly, roles that do provide suitable hours and flexibility are often not even considered as options for participants. We have had considerable success in bringing in employers from disability services; call centres and other initially 'unpopular' choices, which have resulted in participants now considering these options. This tactic has resulted in a number of employment outcomes.

Recommended strategies for promoting Parent Job Seekers to employers

Our business name "Work Savvy Parents" and the nature of a program aimed at helping Parents return to work often opens doors that might otherwise be shut to standard employment services. A lot of employers have been burnt employing long-term unemployed candidates or other disadvantaged groups, but most employers are interested in discussing 'return to work mums' as a possibility. This client group does not have a particularly negative reputation with employers as most employers have wives, mothers, sisters who have returned to work after long absences raising children or have personal experience themselves, and empathize with the difficulties faced by parents returning to work. Basically, the community and employers tend to recognize that full-time parenting is a 'normal' process of family life, and that long term absence from the workforce to raise a family is a fact of life. While some employers may have concerns about issues relating to parents balancing work and life commitments, we have found that most employers do not discriminate as long as the candidate has demonstrated some recent up-skilling and can commit to the working conditions on offer.

We would recommend that programs aimed at Jobless Families or Parents Returning to Work maximise the good will of employers by focusing on the client group as parents. The name of a project should spell out the words 'parents' or 'families' so that employers can clearly identify what type of candidates they would be referred. Separating this group from other unemployed groups will effectively increase the up-take of local businesses.



The Community Services sector seems particularly interested in engaging parents returning to work. Aged Care, Home and Community Care, Disability Services and Children's Services providers seem to value the experience of parenting as a valid and transferable skill. We would recommend that projects aimed at Jobless Families focus on the Community Services Sector as a key employer group. Programs that provide some introductory training into these industries, along with work experience and employer involvement in the program would benefit both parents and assist in addressing the skills shortages in this industry. We would recommend that programs aimed at assisting parents returning to work focus attention on the Community Services Sector, and where possible offer pre-employment accredited training in Children's Services, Disability Services, Aged Care or Home and Community Care.



Demographic of participants

The Parent Mentoring program was aimed at Job Seekers from Jobless Families, particularly those from the following disadvantaged groups

- Those living in disadvantaged areas
- The homeless or those at risk of homelessness
- Persons with mental health conditions
- Indigenous Australians

We also tried to ensure representation from

- People from a non-English speaking background
- Mature aged job seekers
- Job seekers with a disability

Our initial referral and enrolment paperwork did not gather information on homelessness or mental health conditions. We later amended our paperwork, and all 2010 commencements provided this information.

Overview of Demographics

Groups	Homeless or risk of homelessness*	Mental Health Issues / Drug & Alcohol	Disabilities or major illness	CALD	Indigenous
Penrith Oct 09	1		2	6	1
Campbelltown Oct 09					
Penrith Mar 10	1	5	3	1	
Woodridge Mar 10	2	3		1	2
Campbelltown May 10	1	6	4		1
Goodna April 10	3	7	2		
Browns Plains May 10	1	4	2	3	
Penrith July 10	2	2	3	2	2
Goodna July 10	3	4	1		
Ipswich Aug 10	1	5			
Penrith Oct 10	3	10	3	3	2
Campbelltown Oct 10		1		1	
Woodridge Nov 10	1	2	1		3
TOTAL	19	49	21	17	11

* Risk of homelessness statistics included participants who had lived at more than 4 addresses over the past 3 years.

General comments on target groups

- All intakes were located in Employment Priority areas and in areas with high public housing and high levels of unemployment.
- We have had a number of participants who are living in temporary housing (ie caravan parks) or who were under financial stress with their current rental property (eviction notices). Many participants had moved more than 4 times in the last 3 years. Where this was the case, we identified those clients at being at risk of homelessness.



- Many participants have disclosed mental health issues, however we believe there are a significant number of undiagnosed cases of mental health. We worked with those participants who we suspect needed assistance and made referrals to mental health providers and General Practitioners wherever this is appropriate and accepted by the participant.
- We have had a number of referrals from Indigenous Organisations and JSA's referring Indigenous candidates, however we have found there is a very poor uptake and many referrals never commence into the program.
- More than 40% of participants were aged over 40 years.

Recommendations

Homeless and 'at risk' of homelessness clients

We promoted our program to local emergency housing services, but did not get any direct referrals from these agencies. Generally, these services were very excited by our program, but we found that most parents who were living in emergency accommodation or having crisis housing issues were more focused on sorting out their housing needs than returning to work.

We did work with many parents who were in housing that was temporary or unsatisfactory. Examples of these housing issues included families who were living in caravan parks, families who were seeking rental accommodation and staying with friends or relatives in the interim, and families who had moved more than four times in the past three years due to lack of appropriate rental accommodation. Where this was the case, we ensured that these families were referred to appropriate services to assist them to locate more permanent housing.

Although employment is helpful in successfully applying for rental accommodation, having insecure accommodation creates uncertainty for families and most parents in this situation would prefer to secure long term accommodation before seriously seeking employment. The main concerns for parents with uncertain housing include relocating children to different schools, finding and securing appropriate child care services, and in many cases transport to and from employment.

Because the rental market is so competitive, many times parents cannot secure housing in their preferred area. If a parent takes on a job or training program, and is later placed into accommodation some distance from that workplace or training venue, they are likely to have difficulties sustaining their job. Many families with housing issues do not have access to a motor vehicle, and public transport from their new location may be difficult or too time consuming. Having to relocate children's schooling and having to source new child care supports may be difficult in a new location also.

Families need to focus on the most basic needs first and we believe housing is a basic need that must be addressed before employment or training can be genuinely sustainable. We would recommend that jobless families with homelessness issues be referred to specialist services that focus on addressing these issues. Employment Service Providers and projects like ours focus on employment outcome results to meet funding requirements. These services do not have the resources or expertise to work with parents in locating housing. We can mentor and support parents through this process, but there is likely to be an implicit motivation to gain an employment outcome behind these efforts. This may be resented by the participants who have no real interest in work or training until they can put a safe roof over their families' heads. Once families have achieved this basic need, there is a much higher likelihood of real participation and interest in a project like ours.

Clients with Mental Health Issues

Close to 50% of our participants identified as having mental health issues, however we suspect the actual number was even higher. The vast majority of those clients were experiencing depression or anxiety disorders. Many were on medication for these conditions, although many self-diagnosed but refused to take, or remain on medication.

We believe that relationship breakdowns and family law issues are often responsible for the onset of depression and anxiety, and that these conditions are worsened by the physical, financial and emotional



stresses of single parenting. Often isolation, loss of relationships and loss of self esteem compound depression and anxiety.

Clients with depression and anxiety often lack motivation and/or confidence to even participate in a program like ours, and find the concept of returning to work or formal training extremely daunting. We found that we had to concentrate a great deal of our program on addressing self esteem and helping participants to deal with their fears and anxieties about participating in our program, and eventually participating in work or formal training. We found that Life Coaching was extremely beneficial for these clients in helping to address underlying fears and self esteem issues. Our 'make-over' also helped to increase confidence and self esteem. Our mentoring was often very focused on building up self esteem and we often had emotional breakdowns and participants calling us in tears for emotional support over personal issues they were just not coping with.

Some of our clients told us that the program was 'life changing' in helping them to increase their confidence and actually believe that they could hold down a job.

Often the clients with the greatest fears and anxieties initially present as difficult, argumentative and non-participative. They are often extremely negative about the program and any discussion about returning to work. These clients often have many excuses and reasoning to support their opposition to returning to work or participating in any employment programs. We found that these same clients are often the same ones that need the most support and self esteem building. Where we were successful in engaging these clients beyond the first week or two of the program, we found that we had great success in working with them over the long term and achieved many employment or educational outcomes for these clients.

Clients with disabilities and major illnesses

12.5% of our participants identified as having a major illness or permanent disability. We received referrals from Disability Employment providers in Sydney including CRS and DES providers. Many other clients with disabilities were referred through JSAs.

Most of the participants who identified as having a disability, also identified as having mental health issues. We found that we had to work on building motivation and self esteem to help participants get past negative beliefs that were holding them back from participating fully.

We did have quite a few successes with participants with disabilities, particularly those with learning disabilities. We worked closely with specialist disability employment providers and offered additional post placement support for these candidates once they gained employment.

Some clients gained exemptions during the program, and we found that once an exemption had been granted by Centrelink, that participants had no interest in any of our services. Some examples included parents who were waiting for surgery, or who had multiple exemptions for a variety of fairly minor medical complaints. We attempted to maintain contact with exempted clients to offer mentoring or other supports, but we found that participants with exemptions just didn't want any support from us at all. We believe that many exempted participants could have participated in the program without causing stress or affecting their medical condition. Programs like Life Coaching or mentoring were offered via telephone or even at the participant's home (or any other location of their choice), but on each occasion, these offers were refused. We completely understand that medical exemptions prevent job seekers from having to take on employment or training placements that may exacerbate medical conditions, but it seems to us that programs that are not physically demanding and require very little attendance or effort from the participant could still be useful during these periods.

Clients from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds

Although 17 of our participants identified as being from CALD backgrounds, nearly all had very good English and very little culturally specific barriers to employment. This is probably due to the areas that we delivered the program, none of which have significantly higher than average CALD populations.

Many of the participants who did identify as CALD had good educational backgrounds and a desire to find employment. In general, the outcome results for these participants was very positive.

We did come across a few ladies from Middle Eastern backgrounds, and although most participated very well, there were a couple of ladies who we believe were under considerable stress from their family not to work. We had one lady whose husband or son would attend all meetings with her, and would speak on her behalf.



These family members made it very clear to us that they did not want their wife/mother to work. This lady did attend some of the workshop program without her husband, and we did begin to see her respond to the program positively, but often our work seemed to be 'undone' because of the influence of her husband and sons. We suspect that this may be a significant issue in some regions with large concentration of traditional Islamic communities. We believe that these issues would need to be dealt with in a culturally specific way with specialist workers who have an in-depth understanding of these cultural issues and can work closely with the local community to address these concerns.

Indigenous Clients

Although we went to great effort to promote our programs to local Indigenous organisations, we did not receive many direct referrals. We suspect this is because our organisation is not indigenous specific, and that there is a distrust of 'non-Aboriginal' services within the Indigenous community and that trust must be built over long periods of time.

We did work with some Indigenous organisations to help support the participants and towards the end of the project, we found that trust levels were building, and that the support and feedback we were receiving from local Aboriginal services was growing. We worked closely with the Salvation Army's New Careers for Aboriginal People (NCAP) program in Mt Druitt during the later stage of the program, and we found this partnership beneficial to our joint participants. No outcomes resulted from this partnership, but we do believe that given a longer period of time, this partnership would have resulted in positive outcomes for the job seekers. There was quite a bit of talk from some Indigenous organisations about sourcing funding to run a similar program exclusively for Aboriginal women. We had discussions on a number of occasions to submit joint proposals for funding, but these discussions tended to fizzle out and never resulted in any grant proposal being submitted.

Most of the Indigenous participants we worked with had some numeracy and literacy issues, and required support to complete forms or apply for jobs. We had a number of short term educational outcomes, and of the employment outcomes, the most sustainable were those in the Community Services Sector, particularly Aboriginal organisations (eg Aboriginal Home Care Service).

We believe that an Aboriginal specific program of this kind would be very successful, particularly if the mentoring and delivery of the program was coordinated by Indigenous women who can act as role models for their community. We also believe that having an Indigenous representative who could participate in local Indigenous networks to promote the program would increase the participation of parents from Indigenous families. Our project did not have the funds or the scope to become actively involved in regular Indigenous networks, and so we remained 'outsiders' with limited buy-in from the local community.



Participant Survey

Each participant was asked to complete a participant feedback form at the conclusion of the 12 Day Workshop. This feedback has been documented in student files and used to evaluate the program throughout the 18 month term.

At the conclusion of the program, we surveyed a random selection of the participants to gain independent feedback on their experience in the program. The telephone survey was completed by staff members who had no relationship with the participants surveyed (staff involved in the survey were independent from the program, or located at different sites than the participants they called).

The survey asked participants to provide feedback about the following:

- The 12 Day Program
- The “Make Over” component of the program
- The mentors/trainers
- The guest speakers
- The Life Coaching Program (NSW only)
- Ongoing Support
- Employment and Training assistance
- Suggested recommendations to DEEWR regarding future pilots
- Would they recommend the program to other parents

General Feedback Summary

- The feedback on the 12 Day program was generally very positive. The vast majority of participants agreed that the program was beneficial, particularly parents who had been out of work for a long period.
- The feedback on the ‘make-over’ was predominantly positive, and most participants stated that they really enjoyed this component and that they gained significant confidence from the experience. A small number of participants did not take part in the hairdressing component as they did not want to change their hairstyle or had a trusted hairdresser and didn’t want anyone else styling their hair.
- Very positive feedback on the Mentors and Facilitators of the program
- Feedback on the guest speakers was very positive, particularly the employer speakers.
- Nearly all participants of the Life Coaching program stated they enjoyed the process and found it helpful
- Most participants found the mentoring helpful but some felt that they did not need additional support after the workshop, or found that the follow up by our program and their JSA commitments combined was ‘too much’.
- Participants provided information on the type of employment and training support they received (ie referrals to jobs or training)
- Participants who did make a recommendation to DEEWR overwhelmingly stated that they believed a program like this should be funded or stated disappointment that the project funding had come to an end.
- 100% of participants stated that they would recommend the program to other Parents returning to work.



Further Recommendations for Services aimed at Assisting Parents Return to Work

Additional recommendations not already stated in this report include the following:

- Many parents who are dependent on income support through Centrelink are concerned about loss of benefits if they are to return to the paid workforce. We are aware that Centrelink publishes information about income thresholds and provide this information to parents freely, however we have found that many Centrelink Income recipients are afraid of asking Centrelink for information because of a fear of ending up with a Centrelink debt. Fear of financial loss seems to be a big 'road block' for many parents, and this fear is reflected in lack of motivation or resistance to returning to work. We recommend that participants are provided a 'safe' environment to discuss their concerns about loss of income support, and are provided with easy to understand explanations of Centrelink Income thresholds that affect Parenting Payment, Newstart and Family Tax Benefit. Other financial support or training in changes to Housing Commission rents, Pension Cards and Child Care Incentives are also very helpful in addressing fears and increasing motivation.
- Child care is a major issue for many parents. Some parents are concerned about using child care services, but we found the biggest issue is around lack of Child Care options for parents. Major areas of concern include:
 - Cost of formal child care
 - No available formal child care for high school aged children. Many parents are concerned about what their teenage children will 'get up to' when they are not home. Parents with children in year 7 and 8 are concerned about leaving their child/ren at home alone. Other parents have 'troubled' teens that they feel need additional supervision which they cannot provide if they are at work.
 - Lack of formal child care services after 6pm or on weekends. Many casual and part-time roles require parents to work evenings or weekends (eg retail and hospitality) when no formal child care services are available.
 - Lack of places in local childcare services (particularly Vacation Care and OOSH)

Whilst these problems are not easy to address, we feel it is very important that services assisting Jobless Families, particularly Single Parent Families, work closely with participants to find informal child care solutions and provide practical strategies for managing children's supervision while they are at work. These solutions are often complex and require a great deal of thought. We found that many of our participants are isolated socially, and helping them to establish social networks to support them is a really important and valuable part of a program assisting parents returning to work.

- Some of the participants in the program had already returned to work, and had since lost their job and were simply looking for a new job role. These parents had often already managed the process of child care and had a good understanding of the financial benefits of working. These participants may have had less benefit from the program personally, but they made great contributions to the group and provided advice and ideas to other participants. Wherever possible, we made the most of the experiences of these participants to encourage less confident parents that the transition back to work can be positive and issues can be managed well. Often, the experience of peers within the group is more easily accepted by others in the group and we found that peer support was a genuinely effective way of changing attitudes towards returning to the workforce. Where possible, we asked participants of previous groups who had successfully returned to work, to speak about their experiences to new participants. This was a successful exercise and many parents gained confidence from seeing genuine successes from their peers.
- Self confidence and poor self esteem is a significant barrier for many parents, particularly women, who are considering a return to work after a long break caring for their family. These issues are not isolated to parents with participation requirements, but we believe these issues are even greater for many of the participants who fall into this category.



Most of our clients were single mothers, and many had been through difficult relationship breakdowns or other significant personal issues. Many of our participants were isolated socially and did not have good support networks, and many had transport issues that further disconnected them from social and economic participation. These issues combine to create additional stress and anxiety on parents, and they directly affect the self worth and confidence of individuals in their ability to be a productive member of the workforce.

We believe that programs aimed at parents, particularly single mothers, need to invest resources into building self esteem and confidence. Parents with greater confidence simply have greater motivation, and motivation is the key to a successful transition back to work.

The Life Coaching component of this program focused on building self esteem and helping participants to identify their goals and life desires. The action plans designed by the Life Coaches were aimed at identifying personal barriers to achieving their goals and developing strategies to manage these barriers. Simple things like making a new friend or joining a social group were major steps for some participants. Obviously, if a person struggles with basic social interaction, asking them to start a new job and expecting immediate success is just too much to ask of these job seekers. Many of these participants were not identified as having a mental illness, and some were Stream 1 or 2 clients with their JSA. It is difficult to isolate some of these issues through an instrument like the JSCI, but these barriers are real and significant. These participants may be competent at managing their families and lives, and may not be identified as having social issues (social skills may be quite advanced), but shyness or lack of confidence is something that needs to be considered through individual consultation and can only be addressed where there is a level of trust. These participants will resist employment or training if they are frozen with fear about their ability to perform or socialise in a new work environment. They are unlikely to admit this barrier to relative strangers (eg Centrelink Staff or JSA Consultants) and are likely to display resistance or reticence as a 'cover' for their internal fears and anxieties.

- Most of the participants did not have education beyond Year 10 and few had formal vocational qualifications. Many participants initially felt they were not 'smart enough' or would be able to keep up with younger classmates if they took on vocational studies.

During the course of this project, the only Job Seeker training programs in NSW (outside of TAFE) were for Certificate IV or Diploma level qualifications (NSW PPP). Most participants felt overwhelmed by this level of qualification, and even if they had been willing to enrol, they simply would not have met the pre-requisite requirements for entry into this training. We believe that Certificate II and III level qualifications are the most appropriate levels for most of the participants of the program. Frankly, even these qualification levels would be daunting for many of our clients. We did successfully refer and support a number of clients through Certificate IV and Diploma studies, but these participants required 'job ready' skill levels to even get into these programs. The participants most in need of skills training could not readily access training other than two intakes TAFE NSW offer annually.

We did note that Queensland DETA had, what we believed to be, more appropriate Job Seeker PPP funded programs, most which were Certificate II and III level qualifications in appropriate labour market areas (eg Community Services, Retail, Business, Transport).

As part of the mentoring program, we offered free short courses to our participants (Computer Skills Training, Customer Service, Barista Skills). These courses provided some basic skills for participants, but they also provided a stepping stone into further study. When participants had completed a short course, their confidence was built and they were more likely to consider the next step into a full qualification.

We recommend that programs aimed at parents, particularly women who have been disconnected from training or work for many years, provide short courses in basic skills to both provide some skills training and to build confidence and a 'stepping stone' into more formal qualifications.

- Many participants felt that their role as full-time parent, and their long absence from the workforce was a disadvantage in their job search and that they were almost 'unemployable'. We believe this is a matter of perception and that programs for this client group should work on 'normalising' the return



to work process. Millions of parents in this country have been through the 'return to work' process successfully. Taking a break to raise a family is a very normal part of the life-cycle for families, particularly mothers. Parents need to be encouraged that their experience is not unique and that their work as a full-time parent is valuable and offers great benefits to employers.

Our program focused on detailing the skills and benefits that parents offer to employers. Instead of apologising for their work as a parent, we encouraged our participants to be proud of their parenting role and sell the benefits of their parenting skills to employers. Parents, particularly sole parents, have to take full responsibility for their families; they are unable to 'pass the buck' and have to make decisions without support on a regular basis. They are mentors to their children, need to manage conflict and difficult personal issues and often have a maturity level that is of great value in the workforce.

We encouraged parents to be proud of their parenting skills and to use these as selling points in job interviews and applications. For example "I manage a house full of teenagers, so I can definitely manage a difficult customer. I am really confident in my ability to manage conflict". We believe this level of self confidence is appealing to employer, and when it is coupled with a clearly defined return to work plan, offers a very attractive option for most businesses.

- Developing a 'return to work plan' that includes management of family responsibilities is vital to a successful employment outcome. Parents need to have a contingency plan before they start work. We encouraged participants to develop a contingency plan for some of the following family situations;
 - A plan for managing sick children. Support networks to collect mildly sick kids from school, or look after a mildly sick child to reduce absenteeism. We encouraged parents to avoid sick leave for mild illnesses (eg common cold, mild flu etc) where a relative or close friend could manage this situation. We discussed things like establishing networks with other parents within the workplace where shifts could be 'swapped' to help each other manage sick kids etc, and offered strategies to reduce absenteeism to manage kids. Some examples of strategies included offering to swap rostered days or take some work home if appropriate.
 - Informal child care arrangements to help provide flexibility to work on weekends or evenings. This included setting up 'babysitting' groups (which we encouraged within the group) to mind each other's children.
 - Time management, particularly for mornings when parents have to get to work and get the kids to school on time.
 - Organising child care (both formal and informal), and settling kids into the child care routine BEFORE getting a job.
 - Preparing children for their parents return to work by practicing new routines and addressing any fears or concerns that children may have before starting work or training.

It is our belief that employers will not discriminate against parents returning to work when job applicants state their 'return to work' plan. Advising an employer that they are completely ready to return to work, have already organised child care and have contingency plans organised to reduce absenteeism will directly address employer concerns. It also demonstrates organisational skills which are highly regarded in the workplace.



Continuation of Program after Funding Grant

Work Savvy Parents is very proud of the outcomes produced by this program and gained significant organisation learning throughout the process. We are very keen to continue working with this client group and continue to actively seek avenues to deliver programs for Jobless Families, particularly sole parents.

Work Savvy Parents continues to offer outcomes based services for Principal Carer Parents on a fee-for-service basis. Our current program include:

Balancing Family and Career Workshop Programs in a variety of formats

- One-Day Workshop/Information Session for Principal Carer Parents
- Two-Day Workshop
- Four-Day Workshop (including Interview Outfit, Hairdressing, Style Make-Over)
- Nine and Twelve Day Programs which duplicate the PMP workshop

Accredited Training courses which incorporate components of our Balancing Family and Career program and are aimed at Principal Carer Parents. Qualifications include:

- Certificate III in Aged Care
- Certificate III in Business
- Certificate IV in Business
- Certificate III in Disability*
- Certificate III in Children's Services*

* These qualifications are offered in partnership with other RTOs)

For more information on our fee-for-service programs for Jobless Families, please visit us at www.worksavvyparents.com.au or call 1300 764 828

Regards

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