

## Single parents forced to attend 'story time' or lose Centrelink payments

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### Parents on the scheme say they must attend children's activities or undertake self-funded study to qualify

Rosalind Chia was so close to the finish line.

The mother of two had left a violent relationship a few years ago and was now in the final year of a psychological science degree. And then the phone rang – it was Centrelink.

“What’s really frustrating is if they just left me alone for another year, I was nearly finished with university,” she said. “I was so excited to get off Centrelink.”

Chia is one of 68,000 parents who have been placed on a new government program, *Parents Next*, after receiving a call from Centrelink assessing whether they are at risk of “long-term welfare dependency”.

Since July, these parents – overwhelmingly single women – must meet a fortnightly participation plan negotiated with a case worker, known as their *Parents Next* provider. If they don’t, their parenting payment – \$384.25 for a single person – can be suspended or terminated.

Parents say they have been forced by their providers to attend activities such as “story time”, swimming lessons or playgroup, or told to sign up to education courses at their own expense, even if they already hold qualifications.



“I’m in financial insecurity on a fortnight-to-fortnight basis now,” said Phoebe, a 37-year-old single mother of two who already holds a certificate four in accounting.

“If my kids don’t want to go to playgroup, what do I do? Lie?”

“We’re not stupid. We do know how to manage our own lives. I don’t think [parenting] should be devalued. I feel like there’s a real sexist element to it, that you’re doing nothing on the public purse.”

In Chia’s case, a glitch with the MyGov website meant she could not mark down her university study – which she did from home.

Fearing losing her payments, she took the decision to wind back to one subject this semester to focus on complying with the program by getting “job ready”.

“The plan was to do as much study as I can manage, as many classes as I can,” she said. “I was starting each semester with three. If it was too much for the little ones, I dropped to two.

“At that rate, I was going to be done by spring next year. Now, it’s going to take me two or three years.”

Welfare advocates say they are already aware of a number of mothers who have had their payments suspended under the program, including Chia.

The freelance writer said when she was placed on to the program, she was not told she needed to report her income. “So the first news you get is you wake up needing to go get some food that morning and your money is not there,” she said.

Another woman told Guardian Australia she had her payments suspended for a week for not reporting her attendance at a “story time session” at a local library.

“I told the ParentsNext case worker that I never agreed to that as my five-year-old has kindergarten that day,” she said. “She said that my daughter had to skip kindergarten and attend the library story time sessions.

“I’ve only been on parenting payment for a year due to separating from my youngest daughter’s father and having no support. I felt being home was for the best until my youngest started school.”

The government announced the expansion of the \$263m program in the May budget following a two-year trial, during which 3,510 participants had their payments suspended.

“It’s offensive that the government believes that ... women aren’t trying to do what they can to increase the welfare of themselves and their child,” Terese Edwards, the chief executive of the National Council of Single Mothers, told Guardian Australia.

Now that it was compulsory and women faced penalties for not complying, Edwards said it had gone “from a soft touch ... to almost blaming women for undertaking unpaid care”.

People can receive parenting payment until their youngest child turns eight, when they are moved on to the lower Newstart payment. They can be placed on to the ParentsNext program once their child is six months old.

The Greens senator Rachel Siewert, who attempted to block the expansion in the Senate in September, was concerned young mothers would drop off parenting payments altogether, as she said had

occurred with the community development program.

Labor’s employment services spokeswoman, Terri Butler, said the opposition supported the aim of ParentsNext but was “far from persuaded that the government’s targeted compliance framework is suited to a pre-employment program of this type”.

A spokesman for the jobs minister, Kelly O’Dwyer, said the program had helped 3,500 participants find paid work and 9,500 participate in education or training since April 2016.

“Parents participate in activities appropriate for their needs and family circumstances,” the spokesman said. “If a parent is already studying or doing volunteer work, they can do this as their ParentsNext activity, while accessing other benefits of the service.”

Chia lamented that she had been forced to completely overhaul her career plans.

“It felt like I was getting there, despite domestic violence blowing my life to pieces,” she said. “I felt like I had successfully pulled them all back together to resemble some kind of life again. And that I was going to get there really soon. But that agency has been commandeered.”