



Brotherhood  
of St Laurence

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# *A positive influence*

Equipping parents to support  
young people's career transitions

Evaluation of the PACTS program

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## Glossary and abbreviations

BSL	Brotherhood of St Laurence
DEST	Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training
Job Guide	careers handbook supplied to Australian secondary school students by the Department of Education Science and Training
PACTS	Parents As Career Transition Supports Project
Parent	includes guardians and primary carers
SBNA	School-Based New Apprenticeships
Transition	transition from secondary school to post-school options, including work and further education
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning

## Summary

Parents As Career Transition Supports (PACTS) is a pilot project, run by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) on the Mornington Peninsula on Melbourne's southern fringe. It aims to empower parents to better support their children's transitions from school to work and/or further education by building parents' knowledge of post-school pathways and today's job market. The pilot ran from late 2003 until December 2005, funded by the federal Department of Education, Science and Training as one of 23 Career and Transition (CATS) Pilot Projects around Australia. This report evaluates the BSL's PACTS pilot, which was delivered to at least 598 parents in 12 secondary schools over the last two years.

Parents' perceptions of their knowledge about post-school transitions were gauged from 308 responses to a questionnaire distributed before the PACTS workshops. After attending the workshops, 70 parents completed a follow-up questionnaire, and another 25 were interviewed by phone.

### Program design

PACTS was developed by the BSL to better meet the transition support needs of disadvantaged young people on the Mornington Peninsula by upskilling parents to serve as transition supports for their teenagers. Its primary target group was parents of students in years 8 and 9. In interactive, small group workshops facilitated by professional PACTS Trainers over three sessions, parents of government secondary students received relevant and up-to-date careers and transitions information alongside training on communicating more effectively with their teenagers.

PACTS serves as a model of good practice for transition programs for parents. Its design and scope reflect research findings that careers and transition programs should assist parents to: understand careers and the labour market; know how to access and use transitions resources; understand their own influence in the transition process; and engage with and support children in a positive way.

### Meeting needs

This evaluation identified three key issues effectively addressed by PACTS. Firstly, almost all participating parents wanted to support their children's transitions but more than three-quarters felt ill-equipped to do so. By providing up-to-date relevant information and skills to communicate with teenagers about transitions, PACTS worked to equip parents to better support their teenagers. Secondly, many parents were concerned that their children might struggle to make a successful transition from school to work as a result of poor choices. Analysis of participating parents' information and support needs found that the workshops addressed their concerns on a number of fronts. By providing parents with practical information on transition options for young people, the program helped allay parents' concerns about their children making 'the right choice' about either subjects or career paths, by reassuring them that there are a range of viable pathways to employment. And thirdly, parents with lower levels of education were found to be less likely to have talked to their children about careers and transitions. This correlation did not hold after parents had attended PACTS workshops, indicating that PACTS went some way towards overcoming disadvantage.

A survey of 104 secondary students in participating schools showed that a large majority (78%) would like to receive help from their parents in deciding what to do after leaving school. It also showed that 95 students said they had already talked to their parents about what they would like to do after leaving school, making parents the group with whom young people were most likely to have discussed the topic. These findings support PACTS' premise that providing useful and up-to-date information to parents is an effective way of promoting successful transitions.

## Key benefits

Evaluation findings show that PACTS has made a positive difference to many of the parents who participated in the workshops. On the whole, parents were extremely positive about the workshops and found them valuable and enjoyable.

Parents reported increased knowledge about transitions and ability to communicate with young people about the issues, and reduced feelings of isolation, due to meeting and sharing experiences with other parents.

Before the PACTS workshops, only 11% of 308 parents surveyed felt they knew enough about transition options to help their child, 77% did not think they knew enough and 12% were unsure. After attending, of the 90 parents who responded to a follow-up survey or phone interview, 52% felt they did know enough to help their child, leaving 32% who felt they still did not know enough and 16% who were not sure either way. A paired samples t-test found that the change in these parents' responses were statistically significant.

Knowing about transitions options was seen to play a significant role in a parent's ability to provide positive and effective support for their children's transitions. Improved confidence—feeling that they had some idea what they were talking about—was the first step towards opening lines of communication with young people about their transitions. PACTS empowered parents by pointing them 'in the right direction' and giving them a better understanding of the maze of pathways. In particular, parents felt they benefited from lessons on how to use the Job Guide; techniques to help young people match their interests with a career; and understanding that there are certain decisions and steps young people must make for themselves.

The proportion of parents who discussed post-school options with their children increased significantly after attending PACTS. Not only does PACTS successfully encourage parents to talk with their children about transitions, various comments from parents suggest that PACTS improves the quality of their communications. Parents reported feeling less anxious about transitions and a few said that because of this they were now less likely to 'hassle' their children. Some parents commented that PACTS helped teach them the importance of having young people do things (and subjects) that they enjoy, of supporting their children by encouraging them and helping them find information about potential career paths, and of avoiding being negative about students' particular career ideas.

To assess the (indirect) impact of PACTS on young people this evaluation relied on parent perceptions. More than 9 out of 10 parents felt that since attending the workshops their children had benefited at least slightly from the knowledge and/or skills they had gained. Perceived benefits can be expected to increase as the children get older and move closer to transition decisions and parents are likely to draw more heavily and frequently on the knowledge they got from PACTS.

## Success factors

Several reasons for the success of the PACTS model have been identified. Small-group workshops of up to 18 parents provided an informal, friendly setting and encouraged active participation and interaction. Employing trainers who were skilled facilitators and able to ensure a safe and supportive atmosphere in the workshops was important. Drawing on the experiences of all participants and encouraging questions ensured the workshops were relevant and helpful to a range of parents. Indeed, providing an opportunity for parents to meet and share experiences about transitions was a benefit which had not been identified in research elsewhere. Keeping the information delivered clear and focused was vital to maintaining interest and value for participants. Parents also reported that the PACTS handbook served as an excellent resource and point of reference for information they could share with their children.

Other key design and delivery features included initiating and maintaining positive relationships with schools; using intensive recruitment practices, particularly phone calls to parents; and modifying workshop design in response to parent feedback. The enthusiasm, dedication and professionalism of PACTS staff, especially the Coordinator, have been crucial to the success of the program..

### **For consideration**

Although PACTS offers clear benefits to parents who attend, this evaluation suggests that recruiting parents to the program is a resource-intensive process, and that small numbers of participants may jeopardise the ongoing delivery of the program in a particular school. More research is needed to answer the question of whether PACTS reaches the more disadvantaged parents in a school community, and if it does not, how recruitment practices or program delivery might better facilitate this. Some suggestions from parents, PACTS staff and school representatives on how to improve or enhance the program included providing child care; embedding PACTS workshops into the school calendar; involving young people in the workshops to increase parent interest; and holding the workshops outside of schools at more accessible or neutral venues to engage parents who may have negative relationships with schools.

It is to be hoped that the lessons learned from PACTS as a pilot project will inform the development of larger scale transitions programs and lead to the intentional and well-planned inclusion of parents in future initiatives.



# 1 Introduction

This report describes an evaluation of an innovative education program for parents of secondary school children. PACTS, which stands for Parents As Career Transition Supports, is a pilot project that aims to empower parents to better support their children's transitions from school to work and/or further education by building their knowledge of post-school pathways and today's job market. The project was conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) on the Mornington Peninsula and funded by the federal Department of Education, Science and Training as one of 23 Career and Transition (CATS) Pilot Projects around Australia. The Mornington Peninsula on Melbourne's southern fringe was selected for the PACTS pilot after staff on the Transitions Project, a BSL program that works with young people to achieve successful transitions in the same region, identified parent attitudes and knowledge about transition pathways as a barrier to young people's success. Further, the region has high levels of disadvantage among young people, with low school retention rates and high youth unemployment.

PACTS is unique among the growing number of programs that aim to promote successful school-to-work transitions (e.g. Job Pathways Program and Managed Individual Pathways Projects). Responding to increasing recognition of the influence parents have on their children's transition decisions, PACTS is the first transitions program to focus on equipping parents to better support their children's transitions from school.

This evaluation was undertaken by researchers from the Brotherhood of St Laurence Social Action and Research Unit. Its key objectives were to investigate the following questions:

- Has the model used been successful in empowering and encouraging parents to play a more constructive role in their child's transition?
- What factors are critical to the successful establishment and operation of such a system?
- What has contributed to encouraging and enabling parental integration into young people's transition support networks?

The PACTS pilot project ran from late 2003 until December 2005. The pilot model consists of a series of three professionally facilitated workshops run over three weeks at government secondary schools. It was delivered to at least 598 parents in 12 secondary schools. The PACTS model has also been made available to all schools involved in the CATS project nationally and has been picked up by Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) and some regional education offices to support the new Local Community Partnerships initiatives, although these developments are beyond the scope of this evaluation.

In what follows, Chapter 2 provides an overview of current research on the role and influence of parents on young people's transition decisions. Chapter 3 outlines the research methods used for the evaluation. Chapter 4 describes the PACTS program in some detail, including the program rationale, the model of delivery and information about the parents who participated. Chapter 5 considers whether PACTS meets the needs of parents and young people. Chapter 6 looks at the impact PACTS has had on parents and, through them, on young people and schools. Chapter 7 considers PACTS success factors. Chapter 8 highlights areas for further consideration. Chapter 9 summarises key findings and recommendations, including implications for future programs to support parent involvement in transitions from school to work.

## 2 Parents and young people's transitions

The way that young people make the transition from school to work or further training is an important social and economic issue. Young people who leave school early, without alternative career paths, face long-term disadvantages in terms of higher levels of unemployment, more part-time and casual work, a shorter working life, lower incomes and an increased likelihood of ending up in jobs with poor conditions and few opportunities for advancement (McIntyre, Freeland & Melville 1999; Chapman & Gray 2002; Long 2005). Non-employment impacts can include higher levels of depression, lower quality housing and a greater likelihood of early parenthood amongst females (Bynner & Parsons 2002). On the other hand, the ability to identify and access post-school training and work options can lessen the impact of intergenerational poverty and social exclusion.

The role of parents and families in the successful transition of young people from school to work is receiving increased attention. For example, the Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Taskforce (2001) recognised that parents guide many of the decisions taken by young people in their transition and that supporting families is one of the best ways to help young people through career transition.

### Parental influence

Research suggests that parents occupy a unique and critical place in the transition networks of young people that is often unrecognised by both parents themselves and policy makers. In a study of a US program designed to involve parents in their child's career planning, Cochran and Kush (1993, p.434) find that 'through career planning with a parent, adolescents in Grade 12 showed greater career certainty, less indecision, more career salience, and stronger ego identity'. Further, Taylor, Harris and Taylor (2004, p.1) suggest that 'without parental approval or support, students and young adults are often reluctant to pursue—or even explore—diverse career possibilities'. Similarly, in a study measuring the intensity of information seeking undertaken by 236 ninth grade students in German schools, Kracke (2001, p.20) found that parental involvement in career-related issues is one of a series of factors that leads to young people engaging in more intense and effective information seeking activities.

Young et al. (1997) emphasise the important role that career conversations between a parent and a child play. They label these conversations a co-joint action and suggest that they 'shape joint goals [and] shared meaning[s] and regulate action' (Young et al. 1997, p.72). They argue for a re-conceptualisation of transition decision making from something that is undertaken by an individual to something undertaken within the parent-child relationship. Based on their Canadian research demonstrating that parent-child career conversations build and shape the young person's agency, Young et al. advocate initiatives that support joint as well as individual action (1997, p.84).

Trusty (1998) suggests that, particularly in the case of low socioeconomic status families, programs that focus on giving parents access to career information should be prioritised. Drawing on a six-year longitudinal study, he argues that parents from low SES families who have been encouraged to provide support to their children and taught how to access and use career resources can make up for their inability (relative to high SES parents) to share the benefits of educational achievement with their children. He argues that encouraging and training parents to provide informed transition support is a particularly effective way to guard against likely failure of low SES children to achieve their education and career potential.

### Parents as a source of information and advice

Several researchers have found that parents are one of the most commonly consulted and influential sources of career information and advice. In a UK study involving 462 semi-structured interviews with young people who had just completed Year 11, Russell and Wardman (1998, p.9) found that 'on the whole, young people are more likely to have discussed the various [career resource] materials with their parents than with their careers teachers or advisers'.

Similarly, in a study of 12,915 young people completing Year 12 in Queensland, Whiteley (2004) found that parents were one of the primary sources of information on transition options. Looking at students from two schools in a mid-western city in the USA, Paa and McWhirter (2000) found that ‘both girls and boys identify their parents as important influences on their career expectations’ and that they considered their parents’ influence to be positive.

In a cross-sectional study of juniors from six secondary schools in North Carolina, Otto (2000) found that young people were most likely to turn to mothers for help in making career plans and that this applied equally to both genders and across racial groups. He suggests that ‘parents, particularly mothers, are allies and resources for career counsellors in facilitating the career development process’ (p.117). Furthermore, half of the young people he surveyed wanted ‘to talk more about their career plans’, and again this applied across both gender and race. From this data, Otto concludes that there is an ‘opportunity to develop ways to multiply effectiveness [of transition programs] by working with parents to help young people make career decisions’ (p.118).

### **Helping parents support their children**

Some work has also been done examining how to help parents better support their children in transition decision making. From a study of 493 parents, Taylor, Harris and Taylor (2004) conclude that despite many parents having some awareness of their influence, in many cases they were not involved in their children’s decision making because they felt either that they were unqualified to help; they didn’t want to be dictatorial; or it would be better for their children’s independence if they left them to make these decisions on their own. They warn that ‘since it has been demonstrated that parents have a tremendous amount of influence on career choices, it is imperative to help and encourage them to provide constructive and knowledgeable advice to their children’.

Taylor, Harris and Taylor (2004) emphasise the need to prioritise the provision of career information to parents and suggest that this should include information on various careers, how to use career resources, and helping parents understand the influence they have on their children’s transition decision making.

Paa and McWhirter (2000) also argue for programs that support adolescent career development by ‘targeting interventions at the larger ecology of adolescents’ lives through collaborating with their families’ (p.41). They advocate programs that seek to ‘help parents become informed educators and sources of guidance for their children’s career development’ (p.41) and suggest that it would be beneficial if the process of career development were explained to parents, and if parents were made familiar with the career resources available to their children. Like Taylor et al., they contend that it is important for parents to be made aware of the formative and supportive role that they play in the transition process.

Developing more effective programs to help parents support their children is particularly important in the light of survey evidence in Australia and the UK indicating widespread parental dissatisfaction about the present quality of information provided, as well as a desire to make a greater contribution to their children’s transition decisions (Department of Education and Employment 1997; Youth Pathways Taskforce 2001).

### **Key lessons for program design**

From the literature, the key lessons for program design include:

- Parents need to be made aware that they have an important role in transitions.
- Parents need to be encouraged to understand their conversations with their children about careers are vital for young people’s self-investigation, value-forming, career exploration and decision making.
- Parents need access to the career resources that are available to their children so that they can provide informed and accurate advice and support.

### 3 Research methods

To evaluate the success of the PACTS pilot program and document the learnings, a background literature review was conducted and both quantitative and qualitative data have been gathered and analysed.

#### **Program implementation data and staff views**

Relevant literature such as progress reports, the PACTS workbook, information sheets for trainers, proforma letters and program flyers was collected. Data on program delivery and attendance were provided by project management. Regular meetings were held with the PACTS Coordinator during the pilot to document issues concerning program implementation.

Semi-structured interviews (either in person or by telephone) were conducted with the PACTS Coordinator and some PACTS staff including two PACTS Trainers and two PACTS Liaison Parents to establish some of the details of, and their views on, the operation of the program. Semi-structured telephone interviews were also conducted with six representatives of participating schools, including assistant principals, careers advisors and transition workers. These interviews explored schools' perceptions of the challenges experienced and benefits gained by running PACTS. Interviews also canvassed perceived strengths and weaknesses of the PACTS model.

#### **Parents' views**

Two questionnaires were distributed at different stages to parents who attended a PACTS information session or participated in the PACTS workshops. The first questionnaire was designed to gauge parents' perceptions of their level of knowledge about post-school transitions, what types of support they wanted, and whether they had talked to their children about their post-school plans. It was also used to collect some demographic data on participating parents. Three hundred and eight parents completed the first questionnaire. Note that some parents attended as a couple, hence survey responses do not represent 308 different families. The second, follow-up, questionnaire was mailed out to 295 of the initial respondents (who had provided sufficient address details). Seventy completed questionnaires were returned in reply-paid envelopes, a response rate of 23%. The second questionnaire explored changes in parents' interactions with their children since the first questionnaire, and whether the PACTS workshops had empowered them to support their children's transition decisions.

A one-page workshop evaluation survey was distributed to parents at the end of one of the three workshops to provide feedback to PACTS Trainers and the PACTS Coordinator. Data from this survey was used in the evaluation to assess parent perceptions of the usefulness of the information.

Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with 23 parents who had attended PACTS workshops. These interviews were used to increase the number of parent responses to selected questions covered in the second questionnaire, and to gain a greater insight into the benefits of PACTS for participating parents.

Two focus groups were conducted with a total of 14 parents, all of whom had children at participating schools. The second focus group consisted of eight parents who had also been given training that aimed to equip them to become PACTS Trainers and who had then taken on the PACTS Liaison Parent role.

#### **Young persons' views**

One hundred and six young people at schools running PACTS on the Mornington Peninsula completed a questionnaire designed to explore their communication with their parents (and others) about transition choices and the type of supports that they are looking for. The young people surveyed did not necessarily have parents who attended PACTS workshops.

## 4 Program description

### Program rationale

PACTS was established by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) in response to a perceived gap in the provision of careers and transitions information for parents and guardians of young people. This gap was identified by staff in the Frankston-based BSL Transitions Project, which supports at-risk young people to achieve successful transitions. Staff reported that their work with young people was being undermined in the home by parents' attitudes to different pathways to employment (for example, poor regard for apprenticeships). Further, Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula suffer from high youth unemployment and poor school retention rates. Hence PACTS was trialled in an area where young people are likely to need additional transitions support.

Supported by recent research discussed above, PACTS recognises that parents play a key role in supporting their child's successful transition from school to work or further education, but that they often lack up-to-date information and/or knowledge about career and transition options. Accordingly the PACTS program targets parents, providing them with information, skills, and support via interactive workshops and printed materials to help them contribute positively to their child's transition decisions.

### PACTS model

The PACTS program consists of a series of three workshops, held at a given school one evening a week for three weeks. The small-group workshops of not more than 18 people run for two hours and are delivered by a professional PACTS Trainer. Parents can choose to attend one or all of the workshops. Findings from the second, post-PACTS, questionnaire showed that 50% of respondents had attended all three workshops, 25% had attended two out of three, 19% had attended one workshop and 7% could not recall how many they had attended. (Some parents were surveyed more than a year after completing the program). Parents can also attend the workshops more than once, but findings from this evaluation show that only one parent out of 70 had done so. Topics covered are listed below.

#### Workshop One – Beginning to explore

- Finding a place to start
- Occupational categories
- Learning to use the Job Guide
- What's in the careers room?

#### Workshop Two – Career and transition services

- Communicating with your teenager about careers
- Training and further education options after secondary school (TAFE, university, etc.)
- Apprenticeships and traineeships, group training
- Other services including Job Network, Centrelink

#### Workshop Three – Jobs

- Tackling the employment market
- Telephone skills for job seeking
- Preparing for interviews.

Parents are recruited to the program by various methods, depending on the school where the program is being held and how actively the school is involved in recruitment. Typically, a group of parents in Years 8 or 9 (for example, parents of all Year 9 students) are sent a letter describing the PACTS program and inviting them to attend. The letter is ideally followed up by a telephone call

from PACTS staff to encourage parents to attend. Other methods of recruitment include notices in the school newsletter and promotion of the program at school events by senior staff, or more informally through word of mouth and by PACTS Liaison Parents. While some schools extended a general invitation to PACTS to interested parents, the PACTS project targeted parents with children in Years 8 and 9. Some schools have targeted other key groups—for example, parents of students undertaking the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

One of the strengths of the PACTS program is that it is flexible and responsive to parent feedback, and the model of delivery can be altered to better suit and support parents. For example, one significant change to the PACTS model happened at an early stage. Initially the program was based on a Train the Trainer model that sought to train parents to deliver workshops to other parents (these parents now serve as PACTS Liaison Parents). However, it was found that delivering the workshops successfully depended on a strong knowledge base of transition options and pathways, which required more training than was feasible for parents new to the field of transitions. Five professionals are now employed as PACTS Trainers to deliver the workshops.

The workshops have been designed by the BSL's PACTS Coordinator, Mary Tresize-Brown, whose role includes promoting the program, liaising with schools, developing and enhancing workshop material and delivering some of the workshops.

Alongside the key roles of coordinator and trainers are the PACTS Liaison Parents. They take responsibility for organising the PACTS program in their school and acting as a conduit between the school, other parents and the PACTS Coordinator. The Liaison Parents do things such as putting notices in school newsletters, sending invitations home with students, and encouraging parents to attend the workshops by talking to them about the benefits of PACTS. Liaison Parents also organise room bookings and set up the space for each workshop. This role is paid and is supported through regular meetings with the PACTS Coordinator. Not every PACTS school in the pilot has a Liaison Parent; if there is no such person promotion and organisation within the school are undertaken by a member of staff (often the assistant principal).

## **Key program features**

PACTS staff highlighted key design features that were intended to suit the target audience. Small-group workshops (up to a maximum of 18 people) were intended to create an informal atmosphere and encourage active participation and interaction. Trainers were expected to draw on the skills and experiences of all participants and to encourage questions, to ensure the workshops were relevant and helpful to a range of parents. The information delivered in the workshops was chosen carefully for clarity and relevance. Workshops were designed to be inclusive of people with differing abilities and literacy levels: a lecture style of presentation with complex overhead slides was avoided, and replaced by emphasis on discussion and participation. Skilled facilitators were employed as trainers to ensure a safe and supportive atmosphere for participants. The PACTS Handbook was designed so parents would leave the workshops with a good point of reference and information they could share with their children.

## **Workshop numbers**

The PACTS workshops were delivered to at least 598 parents on the Mornington Peninsula. Twelve schools held a total of 53 sets of workshops (or 159 individual workshops) over two and a half years, as detailed in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1 PACTS workshops held 2003–05**

School	Sets of workshops	Period held	Total number of parent attendees
Carrum Downs Secondary College	1	2005	6
Dromana Secondary College	6	2004–05	79
Doveton Secondary College	2	2005	8
Elisabeth Murdoch Secondary College	7	2003–05	65
Frankston High School	8	2004–05	114
Karingal Park Secondary College	6	2003–05	65
Monterey Secondary College	4	2004–05	38
Mornington Secondary College	2	2004	14
Mt Erin Secondary College	8	2003–05	87
Pakenham Secondary College	2	2004–05	22
Patterson River Secondary College	4	2004–05	65
Western Port Secondary College	3	2004–05	35
<b>Total</b>	<b>53</b>		<b>598</b>

### Parent demographics

As might be expected from a program targeting parents of secondary school children, the majority (69%) of the parents who were surveyed were in the 40–49 age group (see Table 4.2). Also, 84% of survey respondents were female.

**Table 4.2 Parent's age**

Age of parent (years)	Number of parents in age group	Age group as % of total
30–39	49	16%
40–49	213	69%
50–59	31	10%
Not given	15	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>308</b>	<b>100%</b>

In 75% of families surveyed the primary income earner was in full-time work, although in at least 9% of families there was no parent in paid work (see Table 4.3).

**Table 4.3 Employment status of main income earner**

Employment status	%
Working full time	75%
Working part time	13%
No work	9%
Not given	4%

N = 308. Percentages add to more than 100 due to rounding.

The level of education of the parent completing the survey (mostly women) varied considerably (Table 4.4). Over one-third of respondents (around 36%) had not completed secondary school nor gained further qualifications, which is similar to the figure for 35 to 54-year-olds in the general Australian population (around 34%). For 16% of parents, Year 12 was their highest level of education, compared with 15% of 25 to 54-year-olds generally. Parents in this sample were less likely to have a university education (13%) than 35 to 54-year-olds in Australia generally (22%) (ABS 2005, p.22)

**Table 4.4 Highest level of education of survey respondent**

<b>Level of education</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Cumulative %</b>
Year 9 or below	7%	7%
Year 10	11%	18%
Year 11	19%	36%
Year 12	16%	53%
Trade/TAFE/Diploma	25%	77%
University	13%	91%
Not given	9%	100%

N = 308

At the time they attended the PACTS workshops, 168 parents (55%) had only one child in secondary school, 118 parents (38%) had two children in secondary school, and 22 parents (7%) had three children in secondary school.

## 5 Meeting needs

This section considers whether PACTS meets the needs of parents, young people and schools.

### Parents' needs

#### Motivations

Some parents who attended the PACTS workshops were asked in a telephone interview why they attended and what they were hoping to get out of the workshops. All 24 parents interviewed said that they attended to get more information (about courses or pathway options) to help them support their children's transitions:

[I attended] to get an understanding of how to help my kids. To get some knowledge about careers choices and to see if there were things I could do at home that I wasn't doing.  
(Parent)

I had a 15-year-old son who was really struggling at school and wanted to do an apprenticeship and we didn't know where to start. [I was hoping for] just some direction and help. As a parent, how do we help him negotiate either staying at school a little longer or moving into an apprenticeship? (Parent)

I was hoping to get knowledge for myself, so I knew what I was talking about. It was really to educate me. (Parent)

#### Transition concerns

Before commencing the workshops, parents completed a short questionnaire. One question they were asked was 'What concerns do you have about your child's move from school to work or further education and training?' Open-ended responses were grouped into themes (see Table 5.1).

**Table 5.1 Parent's concerns**

Parent's concerns for their child's transition	Number of parents	Percentage of all parents
Making right subject/pathway choice	37	22
Lack of information to support decision making	33	20
Child not ready to make a decision, e.g. lack of motivation	23	14
Making the right career choice	22	13
For child to have a secure future	17	10
Child does not know what they want to do	15	9
Child's emotional health, e.g. transition too stressful	6	4
Child gets into the right course	5	3
High cost of further education	4	2
Child has learning difficulties	4	2
Other	3	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>100</b>

The majority (79%) of concerns reported by parents are problems that relate to decision making: making the right decision; having enough information to make the right decision; and not being ready to make a decision. The other key issue, for 10% of parents, was that they were concerned about their child's ability to gain employment and have a financially secure future.

PACTS addresses parents' concerns about decision making by providing parents with practical information on the range of different transition options for young people. This helps allay parents' concerns about making 'the right choice' about either subjects or career paths as they learn that there is more than one way for their children to get where they want to go.

## Information needs

Parents responding to the initial questionnaire were also asked about their current level of knowledge and ability to access helpful information on young people's transitions. While 97% of respondents (299 out of 308) felt it was important to be involved in their child's decision about what to do after finishing school, 77% felt that they did not know enough about employment and education choices to help their child make a decision about what to do after finishing school. A further 11% did not know whether they knew enough and only 11% indicated that they did know enough. Hence, prior to attending PACTS the majority of respondents felt ill-equipped to support their child's transition even though they felt it was important to be involved.

One aspect of feeling equipped to support young people's transitions is knowing where and how to access relevant information. Table 5.2 shows that relatively few questionnaire respondents were confident that they could readily access information from key sources like schools and further education providers. Interestingly the majority of parents said they 'didn't know' whether information was readily accessible from these sources, suggesting that prior to attending PACTS many parents had not yet tried to gather transitions information there. This may be because they believed that their oldest child was still too young to need such careers information.

**Table 5.2 Percentage of parents who believed that information about post-school options was readily available from various sources**

Information source	Information readily available	Not readily available	Don't know
Their child's school	41%	10%	50%
TAFE/Universities	34%	8%	58%
Internet	32%	6%	62%
Centrelink	17%	11%	72%
Community centres	13%	11%	77%

\*Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

Analysis shows that PACTS parents were interested in more information on a wide range of post-school options and services. More parents wanted additional information about apprenticeships and traineeships, TAFE courses and the types of jobs available for young people, than the other options (see Table 5.3). Notably fewer parents (33%) indicated they required further information on employment agencies. The types of transition information sought and valued by parents are expected to vary with the interests and ages of their children. For example, as PACTS is targeted at parents of Year 8 and 9 children, it might be expected that parents might not yet be interested in employment agencies and their services unless they also have older children.

**Table 5.3 Information wanted by parents**

Information type	Percentage of parents seeking information about this option
Apprenticeships/Traineeships	61%
Types of jobs available	60%
TAFE courses	59%
School careers services	54%
Job search skills and training	52%
University courses	48%
Employment agencies	33%

Another type of information covered in PACTS workshops which parents found helpful related to the different education and training opportunities available in the schools. For example, the information about the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) and School-Based New Apprenticeships (SBNAs) helped parents to grasp new terminology and more confidently discuss these options with their children.

After attending PACTS, many of the parents interviewed by telephone (11 out of 24) did not feel they needed further information on transitions. Those parents who wanted to be kept up-to-date on changes to education procedures and processes, or wanted answers to specific questions related to their child's interests and goals—for example, how to organise work experience with a local plumber. This strongly suggests that PACTS is meeting parents' information needs.

### Supports

Parents need to be supported so that they, in turn, are better able to support their children's transitions. Many parents don't know where to start and feel alone when beginning to think about the various questions that transitions present. One way PACTS supports parents is by bringing them together in small-group workshops that encourage and enable peer support. Much feedback was given about the confidence and peace of mind parents gained from listening to other parents' experiences and realising that others were also grappling with similar questions and problems.

Prior to commencing PACTS, 81% of parents believed that having someone to discuss their child's options with would help them support their child. While PACTS does not provide one-to-one information and support, trainers do tell parents who to approach for individual assistance. Further, around 65% of parents felt that (each of) information sessions, industry presentations and receiving written materials would assist them. PACTS provides reference materials which point to other transition resources.

### Parents' education and involvement in transition decision making

Bivariate correlations were performed on the initial questionnaire data to explore relationships between parent characteristics such as age and highest level of education with other variables such as having discussed post-school options, whether parents felt that they knew enough about post-school options and whether they had specific concerns regarding their children.

A positive and significant ( $r=0.36$ ,  $p<0.000$ ) relationship was found between the education level of the parent filling in the survey and having discussed post-school options; and a positive and significant ( $r=0.27$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) relationship was also found between the partner's level of education and having discussed post-school options (see Table 5.4). These findings, supported by earlier research discussed above, suggest that there is more potential for parents with lower levels of education to benefit from PACTS support, because without it they are less likely than more educated parents to get involved with their children's transition decisions. All parents, however, will benefit from having accurate information about young people's transition options.

**Table 5.4 Parent's discussion of career options, by highest level of education**

Highest level of education	Discussed career options				
	Yes		No		Total Number
	Number	%	Number	%	
Year 9 or below	10	45%	12	55%	22
Year 10	16	49%	17	51%	33
Year 11	39	68%	18	32%	57
Year 12	32	67%	16	33%	48
Trade / TAFE / Diploma	61	80%	15	20%	76
University	31	80%	8	20%	39
<b>Total</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>275</b>

### What young people want

Although PACTS was targeted and delivered to parents, its ultimate goal is to promote successful transitions for young people from school to work or further education. Hence it was designed and implemented with the needs and wants of young people in mind. To get a sense of whether PACTS

was an appropriate means for supporting young people's transitions this evaluation looked briefly at what sort of information young people want and where they look for support and advice.

One hundred and four students from eight participating schools completed a short written questionnaire. Forty-five percent were male and 55% were female. Over 80% of the responses (88 of 104) were from students in Years 9 or 10, with the remainder spread across Years 8, 11 and 12. Three-quarters of the students surveyed planned to complete Year 12 (see Table 5.5).

**Table 5.5 How long are you planning to stay at school?**

Year level	Percentage of students
Complete Year 12	75%
Leave after Year 11	11%
Leave after Year 10	6%
Don't know	9%

Number of students = 104. Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

### Parents' role

Overseas research findings strongly suggest that parents are a key source of transitions advice for young people and that parents who engage in supportive conversations with their children and provide information and logistical support to assist their information seeking activities will have a positive impact on their children's transition (Paa & McWhirter 2000; Young 1997; Taylor 1997, Kracke 1997, 2001; Way & Rossmann 1996). Data collected from the young people was used to test whether these findings were true on the Mornington Peninsula. The type of information and support that young people wanted from their parents was also explored.

A large majority of students (78%) said that they would like to receive help from their parents (see Table 5.6). The data shows a weak negative relationship ( $r = -0.233$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) between student year level and wanting help from parents: in other words, older students were less interested in their parents' help. This reinforces the benefits of targeting PACTS delivery to parents of students in the early years of secondary school. Also, it is important to note that 22 out of the 23 students who said they would not like help from their parents had already decided what they wanted to do after leaving school. Hence, the 'no' responses may simply indicate that these students no longer felt that they needed help with 'deciding what to do after leaving school' from anyone—not that they specifically did not want help from their parents.

**Table 5.6 Help from parents**

Response to question: Would you like help from your parents in deciding what to do after leaving school?	Percentage of students
Yes	78%
No	22%

Number of students = 104

The type of help students wanted from their parents was overwhelmingly that they be 'supportive'. They wanted their parents to be open, involved, to discuss ideas and to support their choices. Some students said that they wanted their parents to give good advice and 'talk to me about all my options'. One student welcomed help that involved:

Leaving the decision to you, but giving you helpful advice towards making the end decision. (Student)

This is further supported by the survey data that showed 95 out of 104 students had talked to their parents about what they would like to do after leaving school (see Table 5.7), making parents the group most likely to be consulted. This supports PACTS' premise that providing useful and up-to-date information to parents about transition options is an effective way of promoting successful transitions.

**Table 5.7 Who have you talked to about what you would like to do after leaving school?**

<b>Students were asked to tick <i>one or more</i> of the following options:</b>	<b>Percentage of students who ticked yes</b>
Parents	91%
Friends	85%
Teacher	59%
Other family	51%
Careers counsellor	40%
Other	4%

Number of students = 104

When students were asked who they would like to talk to about what to do after finishing school, the most common response was careers counsellors (56%) (see Table 5.8). However, as a group parents followed closely with 54% of students saying they would like to talk to their parents about post-school options. This demonstrates that PACTS helps meet the needs of those students who would like to information and advice from their parents by encouraging more parents to talk with their children about transitions.

**Table 5.8 Who would you *like* to talk to for information and advice about what to do after leaving school?**

<b>Students were asked to tick <i>one or more</i> of the following options:</b>	<b>Percentage of students who ticked yes</b>
Careers counsellor	56%
Parents	54%
Teacher	45%
Friends	35%
Other family	32%

Number of students = 104

The types of information that the students had discussed with their parents are reported in Table 5.9). More than half the students said they had discussed types of jobs and TAFE or university courses.

**Table 5.9 Have you talked to your parents about any of the following things?**

<b>Students were asked to tick <i>one or more</i> of the following options:</b>	<b>Percentage of students who ticked yes</b>
Types of jobs available	67%
TAFE or university courses	55%
Apprenticeships/traineeships	46%
Job search skills	31%
Centrelink	12%
Other	3%

Number of students = 104

### Information needs

Just over half of the students surveyed indicated that they would like more information about the work and study choices available after school (Table 5.10). However, 22% of students said that they didn't know whether they wanted more information: the majority of this group were students from Year 9 (older students were more likely to say 'No' than 'Don't know'). It is likely that students who responded they 'didn't know' would be more open to exploring transitions than those who said 'no'. Hence, younger students may be more open to discussing transitions with their parents. This further supports PACTS' targeting of parents of younger students, not only as a prevention/early intervention strategy, but also because younger students may be more amenable to talking about transition options.

**Table 5.10 Information about post-school options**

<b>Response to question: Would you like more information about work and study options?</b>	<b>Percentage of students</b>
Yes	53%
No	24%
Don't know	22%

Number of students = 104. Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

The types of information students said they would like included different courses and qualifications available, specific occupations and what they entail, finding employment, what jobs pay and subject selection.

## **Schools' needs**

While parents and families are the program's main target, PACTS requires some involvement from schools to enable program promotion to families. Schools hold parent contact details which are necessary for access to the target group. Hence, the benefits of PACTS to schools were explored.

Staff in PACTS schools reported that due to resource constraints, their transition and careers programs—including Managed Individual Pathways, careers education and Vocational Education and Training (VET) subjects—are directed specifically at students and that they have little capacity to engage parents. However, schools recognised parents as 'highly important' to successful student transitions and valued PACTS as a means to educate parents about transitions:

It's pretty impossible for me to work with parents because the school is so big, but they are very important [to successful transitions] so PACTS is great. (Careers Coordinator)

PACTS empowers parents, which schools don't do in the current structure ... Also, younger and younger kids are at risk of leaving school, so it's good to be getting information to parents who can discuss the implications of this with their kids. (Assistant Principal)

There's a place for [PACTS at this school] because any education for parents is a great positive. Things have changed so much in recent years [in transitions, so] there are many, many pluses for increasing parents' understanding. We wouldn't have got involved in the first place if we didn't think there were benefits to this program. (Assistant Principal)

Even schools with well-integrated transition programs regard PACTS as a valuable complementary program:

The more people who can help young people with their decisions the better! [Also] as a parent you have other kids coming to your home—you can help them too! (School Transitions Worker)

Also many transitions programs only begin in Year 10 and school representatives recognise that some young people benefit from thinking about their transition options at a younger age.

As well as benefits to students, school representatives identified a number of other potential benefits of running PACTS. These included increased parent involvement in schools (e.g. at parent teacher interviews); less time spent by schools explaining new options such as the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) to parents; and better use of school careers resources by parents.

## 6 Benefits of the program

The PACTS program impacts directly on parents on the Mornington Peninsula who attend, and through them, reaches out to support young people's transitions. This section explores the benefits of PACTS has for participating parents, and how the information and communication skills learnt at PACTS result in more supported and successful transitions for their children and also other young people.

### Benefits for parents

Findings of this evaluation show that PACTS has made a positive difference to many of the parents who participated in the workshops. On the whole, parents were very positive about the workshops and found them valuable and enjoyable:

[PACTS] was very timely for us and we were very pleased to have done it. It really helped us. (Parent)

I think PACTS was great. If parents have the opportunity, they really should do it! (Parent)

Key benefits reported by parents who attended PACTS workshops included an increased knowledge of and ability to communicate about young people's transitions, and reduced feelings of isolation that come from meeting and sharing experiences with other parents. Importantly, many of the other benefits parents gained from PACTS derived from these. For example, once parents realised there was a range of transition options for young people they felt less worried about their children's futures and this enabled more open and productive communication about transitions:

I'm not panicking so much because I'm more confident that they [the children] are on the right track. So if they're not doing well in other sections [I don't worry because I know] that they have many options. (Parent)

It's had a big impact on the families who have attended! Parents who I have spoken to about PACTS are very positive. They are over the moon about it. They are relaxed about [student transitions because] they know what's there [to support them] and how to access it. (Careers Coordinator, in-school PACTS contact)

A few parents who had older children, some of whom had already finished school, commented that they would have found PACTS a useful support earlier:

[The workshops] were really helpful. I wish they'd been available years ago. Even though our other sons stayed through until Year 12, I would have felt better equipped as a parent to be able to help them think about [career] directions. (Parent)

Most of the parents had students in Year 10 or below and didn't understand VCAL, VCE, VET, [and] ENTER scores. Lots of questions the first night were about this. I have a daughter in Year 12 and wish I had known more when she was in Year 10. (Parent)

### Increased knowledge base

As increasing parents' knowledge about transition options for young people was the main aim of PACTS, it is important to get a sense of whether this was achieved and what difference it made to people's lives.

To capture the difference PACTS made to parents, their responses to key questions asked before and after the workshops were compared. The questions were 'Do you feel you know enough about employment and education choices to help your child make a decision about what to do after leaving school?' and '(Since attending the workshop/s,) have you and your child discussed the employment and education opportunities available after leaving school?'

Before PACTS, only 11% of 308 parents surveyed felt they knew enough about transition options to help their child, 77% did not think they knew enough and the rest did not know whether or not they knew enough to help. After attending PACTS workshops the proportion of the 90 parents responding to the follow-up survey or phone interview who felt they did know enough to help their child was 52%, leaving 32% who felt they still did not know enough and 16% who were not sure. A paired samples t-test found that the change in these parents' responses were statistically significant.<sup>1</sup> Telephone interviews with PACTS parents suggest that at least some of those who felt they did not know enough about employment and education options were not expressing a negative outcome: rather they felt there was always more to know and so perhaps they did not yet know the particular piece of information that their child might need. For example, some parents who said 'No, I don't know enough' qualified their response with 'But I know a lot more than I did before doing PACTS'.

Hence, PACTS made a significant positive difference to whether parents felt they knew enough to help their children make transition decisions. This finding is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it strongly suggests that PACTS provides parents with information that they find relevant and useful. And secondly, because there is a positive and significant correlation between parents feeling they know enough about young people's options and discussing those options with their children, it is reasonable to expect that PACTS parents will more likely to engage in discussions about transitions.

After taking part in PACTS, parents reported an increased awareness of:

- education and training options open to young people;  
It helped me to gather skills and understand the options open to my child and the language of today—VTAC, VET, etc. (Parent)
  - employment options for young people:  
The workshops gave me a broad overview of how the employment sector works today and this has changed so much from twenty years ago. I am now updated and therefore can help guide my children on their way to successful employment. (Parent)
  - Centrelink and job search services
  - how to locate transitions information to assist young people
- and
- how to use the Job Guide:  
My eldest one said, 'I want to do photography, but I've looked in the book and there's no course'. And I said, 'Actually it's usually under something else, under an art course or whatever'. [I was surprised] when that came out of my mouth without thinking ... I learnt that [at PACTS]. (Parent)

For many participants the information gained at the workshops made a big difference to their confidence to help their children with transition decisions:

[PACTS] helped us, as parents, move out of that place of feeling relatively inadequate as to how to help our children find future directions regarding education and/or job opportunities. (Parent)

[PACTS helped] by giving me confidence to be able to help him [my son]. Before I was just a bit lost, not knowing what I could do. I was feeling under-skilled and not able to help him very well. (Parent)

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<sup>1</sup> A paired samples t-test was conducted to measure the change in responses from parents who completed both the initial and follow-up surveys. Responses were from 1 to 3 where 1=yes, 2=don't know and 3=no. There was a statistically significant decrease in the mean scores from the pre-PACTS survey (M=2.71, SD=0.68) to the post-PACTS survey (M=1.83, SD=0.91),  $t(86)=8.41$ ,  $p<0.0005$  indicating that after PACTS parents were more likely to feel they knew enough to help their child. The eta squared statistic (0.45) indicated a large effect size.

[What was the most valuable thing you learnt at the workshops?] Just the information! There's so much more [transition options] out there now and the workshops told you about the contacts and websites to look at. Otherwise I wouldn't have done it! (Parent)

These comments highlight the key role that having appropriate knowledge plays in a parent's ability to provide positive and effective support for their children's transitions. Feeling that they had some idea what they were talking about was the first step towards opening lines of communication with young people about their transitions. PACTS empowers parents by pointing them 'in the right direction' and giving them a better understanding of the maze of transition options.

PACTS does not give them the answers but the tools and skills to explore the range of options available to their child. Parents felt they benefited from:

- lessons on how to use the Job Guide (a careers handbook distributed to Australian secondary students by the Department of Education Science and Training):  
[When] the Job Guide appeared at our place...I had no idea what it was. It was only that we had spoken to [the PACTS Trainer]... and got to go through it [that we] understand just how much of a bible that is. (Parent)
- techniques to help young people match their interests with a career
- understanding that there are certain decisions and steps young people must make for themselves:  
Instead of being over-helpful and organising his work experience for him [my son] I just sat and listened to him. He did it all himself. And I was so proud of him and he was proud of himself. And I think geez, thank heavens I came along [to PACTS]. (Parent)

Learning about the broad range of employment and further education pathways available to young people had a calming effect on many parents. For example, one parent whose son had left school to do a traineeship said that what she learnt at PACTS was a great relief to her:

It's been fantastic for me to know all the options available for him, to see everything in a positive light. Instead of thinking, 'Oh no, what is he going to do?', I can see [he's] got lots of fantastic options out there. (Parent)

One PACTS Trainer commented:

For parents whose kids are struggling a bit at school, the workshop helps them feel a lot better about the possibilities for their kids. Parents realise that their kids aren't locked into the traditional pathways that they are struggling with. (PACTS trainer)

This helped reduce stress in the household because parents were less worried about children making the wrong choice. Parents realised that there was not one right pathway but a variety of pathways to help their child achieve a successful transition:

I got what I went for—got the information and got more confidence on how to approach this whole thing. Also, understanding that the first job isn't necessarily the most important thing; that there are many paths to get somewhere you want to be. (Parent)

By using knowledge to increase parents' confidence and capacity and reduce their worry and stress about bad transition outcomes, PACTS opens a new space for communication between parents and teenagers.

## Improved communication

PACTS trainers stress to parents the importance of talking to young people about their transition plans, and the positive support role they can play for their child. To test the impact of PACTS on this aspect of parent behaviour, parents were asked whether or not they had talked to their children about transitions both before and after attending PACTS. Table 6.1 shows the responses of 90 parents.

**Table 6.1 Parents who discussed transitions with child (pre- and post-PACTS)**

Discussed before PACTS \ Discussed after PACTS	Discussed after PACTS		Total
	Yes	No	
Yes	63	2	65
No	19	6	25
Total	82	8	90

The most striking change in the table above is that of the 25 parents who had not talked to their children about their transition plans before they attended PACTS, 19 subsequently spoke to their children about transitions. In total, 82 out of 90 parents spoke to their children about transitions after attending PACTS. McNemar's test indicated that the increase in the proportion of parents that discussed post-school options after attending PACTS was statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). Reasons for not having spoken to their children, garnered during telephone interviews, included feeling that their child was too young to be thinking about transitions or that the children were not interested in what parents had to say.

Not only does PACTS successfully encourage parents to talk more with their children about transitions, but also various comments from parents suggest that PACTS improves the quality of their communications. Parents reported feeling less anxious about transitions and a few said that because of this they were less likely to 'hassle' their children. Some parents commented that PACTS helped teach them the importance of having young people pursue activities (and subjects) that they enjoy, and that parents could support their children by encouraging them and helping them find information about potential career paths and by avoiding being negative about particular career ideas:

My youngest one ... wants to become a mechanic. My husband and I said 'Don't go there, you'll hurt your back ...' But at the PACTS course I learnt don't do that because we're fighting against what he wants to do. [We've found] it's helped us to back off and let them say what they want to say and go along with it. We were pretty concerned when [the children] bring something up that doesn't seem right and now we're not so worried. (Parent)

Even if a child is difficult or they have already made decision, parents can operate as a useful sounding board. [At PACTS parents learn to say] 'Tell me about your decision'. [Hence] kids learn that parents are interested and supportive of their decision. (Parent)

Some parents said that the information and skills they learnt at PACTS had improved their interactions with their teenagers:

Well [now] I have more of an understanding, so I can give [my kids] more of an idea. So we can communicate better about it [transitions]. (Parent)

## Supported parents

While the ultimate goal of PACTS is to promote successful transitions for young people, PACTS has also provided important benefits to participating parents. Many parents enjoyed PACTS

because it was an opportunity to speak to other parents about their experiences. Some reported that this helped overcome feelings of isolation and others appreciated other parents’ first hand accounts and insider tips.

[The workshops] were good. I got a lot out of them. Especially with the other parents there. Sharing experiences with other people who have gone through it gave me a bit of hope. Listening to the similar experiences of others you find you’re not the only one alone out there. (Parent)

[Did you benefit from attending?] Yes. Now I’ve found out about the huge number of ways kids can get to where they want in their careers. Also, realising that I’m not in it alone—that lots of parents are trying to help their kids without forcing them in a particular direction. (Parent)

By supporting parents, PACTS works through them to support young people’s transitions. As one parent stated:

She [my daughter] has benefited because I felt more confident. I’ve been able to give her better help and support. I’ve felt more supported in supporting her. (Parent)

### Survey findings

Table 6.2 reports findings from the second parent questionnaire about the rating of the different benefits from attending PACTS. The mean (or average) of parent ratings is shown, with standard deviation in brackets. The higher the mean, the more parents agreed with the statement; the standard deviation indicates how widely the responses varied. The statements are listed from most strongly agreed with to least agreed with.

**Table 6.2 Benefits to parents who attended PACTS**

Agree or disagree with the following statements: Since PACTS,	Mean (Scale: 1=Strongly disagree, 3=Neutral and 5=Strongly agree )
I am more aware of the range of education and training options for young people.	4.20 (SD = 0.624)
I am better able to support my teenagers to make decisions about what to do after leaving school.	4.11 (SD = 0.667)
I feel more confident about talking to my teenagers about their future work and study options.	4.07 (SD = 0.683)
I am able to help my teenagers link their interests to potential jobs or careers.	3.99 (SD = 0.643)
I am more aware of employment options available to young people finishing school, including apprenticeships and traineeships.	3.99 (SD = 0.707)
I know how to use the Job Guide.	3.94 (SD = 0.876)
I play a more active role in my teenager’s decisions about what to do after finishing school.	3.89 (SD = 0.766)
I am better able to locate and access relevant information <b>outside schools</b> about young people’s transition options.	3.86 (SD =0.743)
I am better able to locate and access relevant information <b>in schools</b> about young people’s transition options.	3.79 (SD =0.674)
My teenagers are more likely to discuss their future work and study options with me.	3.79 (SD =0.860)
I am more aware of Centrelink and other job search services available to young people finishing school.	3.68 (SD =0.807)

Since all of the statements of benefit received average ratings above 3—that is, on the positive side of neutral—the majority of parents agreed that they had gained the benefits listed. The three highest

ranked statements demonstrate that parents believed that after attending PACTS they were more aware of education and training options open to young people, they felt better able to support their teenagers with their transition decisions and they felt more confident about talking to their teenagers about transition options.

## Benefits for young people

To assess the impact of PACTS on young people, this evaluation relied on parent perceptions of the benefits that flowed to their children (see Table 6.3). More than 9 out of 10 parents felt that since attending the workshops their children had benefited at least slightly from the knowledge and/or skills they had gained. These benefits can be expected to increase as the children get older and move into transition and parents are likely to draw more heavily and frequently on the knowledge they got from PACTS.

**Table 6.3 Do you think your teenager has benefited from your attendance at the workshop/s?**

Level of benefit to teenager	Number of parents	Percentage of parents
Not at all	8	9%
Slightly	25	27%
Quite a lot	50	54%
Very much	10	11%
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>101%</b>

\*Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

There was positive and significant correlation ( $r=0.22$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) between how much parents felt that their children benefited from PACTS and thinking that they did not know enough to help their children with transitions before attending PACTS. That is, parents who initially felt ill-equipped to help their children with transitions were more likely to report that their child benefited from their attendance at PACTS. This reinforces the finding that PACTS made a difference to the confidence and abilities of parents to support their children better through transition. As one parent commented:

VCAL or VET—that used to be a foreign language to me. Knowing more about these things helps them with their planning for next year’s subjects. [My son] was saying he wanted to do something with his hands, so we talked about doing woodwork and some electronics [subjects] so he could decide what he liked more. I wouldn’t have known about these things before. (Parent)

Not surprisingly a positive and significant relationship ( $r=0.31$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) was found between the reported benefits to children and whether the parent had talked to their child about post-school options since attending PACTS. This is because the benefits to young people are most likely realised as parents pass on the information they gained at PACTS to their children:

I came home [from PACTS] and spoke to my daughter about what’s going on and she stopped worrying about VCE, which she was really stressed about, because I was able to tell her about a whole range of ways into further education. Her life became a lot happier because she realised that she had other openings. The more they relax, they do better! She went straight on (from school) to TAFE and is now a few months from finishing her diploma. (Parent)

Interestingly, a positive and significant correlation ( $r=0.33$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) was also found between reported benefit to children and the parent’s level of education: parents with a higher level of education were more likely to say that their child had benefited from the parent’s involvement in PACTS. It is unclear, however, whether a positive relationship would exist between actual benefit to young people (which was not measured) and parents’ level of education. Parents’ perceptions of

benefit to children may not reflect actual benefit to children and may be coloured, for example, by differing perceptions of the value of education.

### Supported and successful transitions

Young people are likely to gain many benefits that flow on from their parent's attendance at PACTS workshops. Many of these (such as those that stem from their parents improved understanding of transition options) have been highlighted above in the section about impact on parents. Effective parent support is crucial for the considerable percentage of young people who said they had not spoken to teachers (41%) or a careers counsellor (60%) about what they would like to do after finishing school

The following examples provided by parents illustrate the specific ways that PACTS has helped them to support young people better. The examples highlight the impact that parents' enhanced knowledge and skills can have on the breadth of support they are able to provide, from assisting with subject choices and job applications to encouraging them to explore different career pathways:

[Did the workshop encourage you to do something different?] I helped one of my daughters' boyfriends out with going through the VTAC guide and helping him apply for jobs. I wouldn't have attempted that in the past. He was like, 'How do you know all this stuff?' I said, 'I went to this workshop'. (Parent)

I was able to help my daughter compile a CV and because of the workshop I took my daughter and her friend to a careers expo in the city. And they were fascinated! My daughter's friend who'd already chosen her career [in Year 10] was thinking 'Maybe I'll do something else?' It was also very helpful when it came to choosing subjects for VCE; we were able to work through it together. (Parent)

My eldest son has done an about-face [completely changing career interest, but, thanks to PACTS] I didn't get thrown! We have been around talking to lecturers in the course he is interested in now. Before, I would have just said apply and see how you go. But now I know it's important to find out as much as you can about what you think you want to do! (Parent)

One parent said that she attended PACTS because she had a 15-year-old son who was really struggling at school. She was looking for 'some direction ... help'. The workshops 'encouraged us to realise there was an option [for our son], even though it says you need Year 10 to get into TAFE we learnt that there were ways'. After doing PACTS, she supported her son to move out of school into a six-month pre-apprenticeship course because 'he was heading for depression' by staying in school.

Comments from some parents also suggest that after they attended PACTS their children were more likely to listen to their advice and/or approach them for information.

PACTS gave us mutual things to discuss that we knew were really constructive things, so we could work with him in a way we hadn't been able to before ... He [now] feels that we are on the same page with him. (Parent)

My daughter now realises how dedicated I am to assist her in her career. I would have been just as actively involved but now 'Mum does know something'. (Parent)

One parent commented that PACTS had had a specific impact on their daughter.

[Additional comments?] My daughter [now] feels more confident about seeking job opportunities and [knows] where to find them. (Parent)

## Benefits for schools

Interviews with PACTS staff, school staff and parents highlighted some benefits for participating schools. Schools representatives and PACTS staff commented that there was great potential for PACTS to benefit schools, but most felt too small a proportion of the school's parents attended workshops for the program to have any noticeable impact on the school as a whole. However, all school staff agreed the workshops were worthwhile and noted substantial benefits for the parents who attended PACTS.

One of the potential major benefits for schools, not yet fully realised, was that PACTS would foster improved relations between parents and schools: the engagement helps parents understand what schools can and do offer their children and encourages schools to seek further involvement with parents. One parent commented that after attending the workshops:

I decided to get a bit more involved with the school, helping out at the library and getting into a bit more close contact with the school community. (Parent)

One careers teacher said that PACTS helped to clarify the transitions resources schools have available for parents to access. PACTS could also reduce the workload for schools:

If parents are more informed it will make it easier for schools to run through subject choice and pathways information. (Transitions worker)

Also, parents who are more informed about transition options can answer more of their children's career related questions and provide more effective assistance with choosing subjects. Parents' assistance cannot replace the expertise of careers teachers and transition workers, but can make the time they spend with students more productive by helping their children consider some of the general issues at home.

One school representative commented that running PACTS at the school might have improved parent attendance rates at parent-teacher interviews. A PACTS Trainer said that having careers teachers visit PACTS workshops (which occurred in some schools) was really valuable 'because it provides a reference point for parents in the school ... they know who to approach'.

The benefits to schools of running PACTS will become more evident in direct proportion to the number of parents in their community who have attended the workshops and are, consequently, better able to support their teenagers. However, as noted by school staff, PACTS has significant benefits for the each parent who attends.

## 7 Success factors

This evaluation identified seven key factors that have been critical to the successful establishment, operation and outcomes of PACTS:

- interactive, small group workshops;
- relevant and up to date information;
- skilled and knowledgeable facilitators;
- intensive recruitment practices;
- targeting specific groups of parents;
- responsive to parent feedback; and
- fostering key relationships for smooth program delivery

As this evaluation was of the operation of the pilot program running on the Mornington Peninsula some of the key success factors are described in relation to delivery in schools. However, PACTS could potentially be delivered outside of the school system; and in these cases successful recruitment and key contacts and relationships would vary accordingly.

### Interactive workshops

PACTS workshops are small group, interactive workshops where parents sit around a table together with a PACTS Trainer and learn about transitions through discussion, sharing experiences and going through the PACTS handbook. This relaxed and informal style of delivery is used to help ensure that the information provided is accessible to parents with different literacy skills and draws on adult learning principles. Parents like the informality:

I liked it because it was low key. Just mums and dads trying to get an idea of how to help their kids ... No suits—I really liked that. (Parent)

Parents who attended were very happy with this style of workshop, which allowed them to get answers to their questions and also learn from other parents.

The comfortable relaxed atmosphere invited questions. The topics weren't so rigid that questions could not be followed through. This personalised the evening and made it very meaningful. (Parent)

I liked [the workshop] because it was an open forum sort of thing. There were other parents there who were also concerned about their kids. [It was] getting people with common interests together to share experiences. (Parent)

Many parents commented that they really enjoyed the workshops because they realised that they weren't the only parents struggling with their children's transition issues.

It was good being able to relate to other parents going through the same things. You don't feel as alienated ... because it's going on in households all around. (Parent)

The majority of parents felt happy and comfortable at the workshops, because of the group interaction:

[I liked] the way the group interacted with each other. It wasn't someone just telling us how it is. We got to form our own ideas [through] sharing our ideas and experiences. (Parent)

Everyone wanted to listen to one another. It was a happy environment. (Parent)

The interactive workshop encouraged people to work together and help each other. One parent with limited English literacy skills said:

There were some other mothers who helped me with filling in the forms because I'm not very fast—I was educated in Holland. (Parent)

Data from the workshop feedback sheet shows that parents were very positive about the structure and delivery of the PACTS workshops. They were asked to rate a series of statements on a scale of 1 (= strongly agree) to 5 (= strongly disagree). Four of the statements, all about the content, structure and delivery of the workshops, were given a very positive average rating between 1 (= strongly agree) and 2 (= agree). The statements are listed below:

- The workshop was well-paced.
- The workshop was aimed at an appropriate level for me.
- The workshop materials were easy to understand.
- My concerns/questions were addressed by the trainer.

## Relevant information

The information delivered to parents is key to the success of the program. The information provided by PACTS is relevant to parents and young people's needs and it is up to date:

[What valuable things did you learn at PACTS?] The huge range of what was available. The resources you can use to help your child find a course or find out about jobs they might want to do. Not just the internet, books available at the library that I didn't know existed. (Parent)

The help with preparing [the kids] for interviews was useful ... [also, we] found out they can use TAFE to get into uni. (Parent)

[How does PACTS support successful transitions?] The fact kids can talk about it [their transition] with their parents based on fact is great. (PACTS Trainer)

The information is delivered in a manageable, bite-sized format and is kept as straightforward as possible. The interactive nature of the workshops helps PACTS Trainers address issues that are relevant to those who attend. Some parents reported that the handbook was very useful as a point of reference:

The handbook came in handy. I went through and had a look at them with my daughter based on the things she likes. But I'm lucky as she has a pretty good idea of what she wants to do. (Parent)

I thought the book was quite good, well put together. (Parent)

The majority of parents felt that PACTS was very comprehensive and there was no need to extend the range of topics covered. Table 7.1 shows how important parents considered each of the topics currently covered by PACTS.

**Table 7.1 Mean survey responses to question: How important do you think it is for the following topics to be included in PACTS workshops?**

Topic	Mean responses from parents (1=Not at all important, 2=Somewhat important, 3=Very important)
Information on matching young people's interests to jobs that might suit them	2.86 (SD = 0.348)
Information on how to use the Job Guide	2.78 (SD = 0.419)
Strategies for communicating with young people	2.82 (SD = 0.425)
Information about what careers resources are available at schools and how to access them	2.94 (SD = 0.231)
Information about possible education and training options for young people	2.96 (SD = 0.201)
Information on different types of jobs available to young people	2.90 (SD = 0.298)
Information on how to help your teenager prepare for job interviews or search for jobs	2.88 (SD = 0.373)
Information about Centrelink, employment agencies and other transition related programs and services for young people	2.76 (SD = 0.459)

The three topics most consistently ranked by parents as 'very important' were:

- information about possible education and training options for young people
- information about what careers resources are available at schools and how to access them
- information on different types of jobs available to young people.

However, all the topics mentioned in the survey received high average responses, which means they were considered either somewhat important or very important by the vast majority of survey respondents. Interviews and open-ended responses from parents pointed to the usefulness of the Job Guide, tools to match young people's interests with potential career paths and learning the language of VCAL, VCE and other education sector jargon.

PACTS Trainers and some parents mentioned the value of using the workshops to introduce parents to their school's careers and transitions staff.

[Because of PACTS] I know who my contact is at the school – the vocational guide – she introduced herself at the workshop and we have spoken subsequently. We talked about what subjects my daughter should do. (Parent)

## Key people and relationships

A number of people, staff and institutional relationships are central to achieving PACTS goals. The drive and dedication of the PACTS Coordinator in promoting and running the program was central to PACTS' success. The Coordinator developed strong, productive relationships with local schools and PACTS Liaison Parents. These relationships were essential to organise, schedule and run the workshops in the schools, and to promote the workshops to parents in the school community. The school contact person was ideally a senior staff member with authority to approve the school's involvement, book rooms and promote the program at school events and in the newsletter. While it was not crucial that each school had a PACTS Liaison Parent, they benefited PACTS by ensuring that the workshop ran smoothly (e.g. taking care of tea and coffee, setting up the room, and bringing the Job Guides for parents to use) and also promoting the program to other parents:

The school liaison person is key. They have the keys to get in [to the school] and deal with all the practical stuff. They tell parents where to come within the school.  
(PACTS Trainer)

## Skilled facilitators

Competent, knowledgeable and skilled workshop facilitators are crucial to the success of PACTS. Parents reported that the workshops were well presented and well facilitated and this no doubt resulted in higher retention rates through the series of workshops. The PACTS Trainers were skilled at managing groups and setting up safe environments for people to share their problems and concerns:

I thought the facilitator was very good. She put everything in plain English and laid it all on the line. (Parent)

[The facilitator] did a wonderful job with these workshops... she went out of her way to provide the information we all were seeking. She made it seem not so daunting. A must for all parents concerned about their children's future. (Parent)

[What did you like?] The knowledge of the teachers [trainers]. They built a lot of knowledge in me to help my child with career choices. Any questions I had they were quick to help me out. (Parent)

## Intensive recruitment practices

The key to PACTS success is getting parents to attend the workshops. The PACTS Coordinator and school representatives reported that the most effective way to ensure parents attend PACTS workshops was to send out letters on school letterhead to a targeted group of parents (for example, parents of Year 9s or parents of VCAL students) and follow-up with a telephone call to explain the benefits of attending:

I've sent out fliers [about PACTS], I've put information on the [school's] home page. Ringing [parents] is the only thing that works. [There is] no response from other methods [of promotion]. (Assistant principal)

Other complimentary methods of promotion include articles in school newsletters, promotion by school staff or PACTS Liaison Parents at school events and inviting the PACTS Coordinator to speak at parent information nights:

[What has worked to increase PACTS' numbers?] Information evenings where Mary [the PACTS Coordinator] spoke to parent cohort were a real positive. It worked really well to get parents on board. (Assistant principal)

## Targeting parent groups

The PACTS pilot targeted its services to parents of children in the early years of secondary school. This is in line with research into careers education for young people that suggests that the provision of transition information and support needs to start earlier than Year 10 and highlights the benefits to young people's transitions of starting to explore career options early on. PACTS was designed to help parents explore transitions options with their children, not to be an intervention program to help teenagers with specific transition issues. PACTS Trainers felt that PACTS worked best with parents who are open to exploring opportunities—who were in the discovery phase—not for parents who are already stressed about their child's transition and want answers and solutions to specific questions. Parents at this stage were likely to be parents of younger students. However PACTS staff feel the workshops could also work well for parents of older students if they were limited to 6 to 8 participants and focused on their specific questions.

Evaluation findings support PACTS position that transition support services are ideally delivered to parents of students in the early years of secondary school. Parents with older children commented that they would have liked to have done PACTS earlier because they would have been better able to help their children if they had known the things PACTS taught them. Findings from the student survey suggest that students in the early years of secondary school are slightly more open to talking

to their parents about transitions—if only because they are less likely to have decided what they want to do.

However, this research shows that the vast majority of parents who attended PACTS, not only the parents of younger students, felt that they and their children benefited from the information and skills they gained. On average the comparatively small number of parents with older children did not feel that they benefited less from attending PACTS than parents with younger children felt.

Targeting parents with children of a particular age also promotes the benefits for attendees as the interactive workshops—in which participants are given the opportunity to ask questions and explore transition issues together—work better if participants have similar issues and interests. While many parents commented that they enjoyed hearing about the range of options open to young people, a few parents suggested that perhaps the workshops should be more specifically targeted, for example, by running three streams of PACTS: a VCAL stream, an apprenticeship stream, and a university stream, to ensure attendees were interested in the same topics. Some parents commented that they did not benefit as much as they could have from PACTS because the other parents were interested in finding out about different transition options. One parent said:

[I didn't like] having to work with parents [who had] children who were capable and confident. These people tend to make me uncomfortable as my son is not a high achiever and will find transition to [further] study/employment difficult. (Parent)

### **Responsiveness to parent feedback**

The PACTS Coordinator was very responsive to parents' feedback about the workshops and made a number of changes to the model throughout the project as a result. The length, delivery and structure of the workshops were altered to better suit parents. For example, three-hour workshops were reduced to two hours; and the discussion of skills for communicating with young people—considered a somewhat confronting topic—was moved from the first session to the second.

## 8 Areas for further consideration

### Involving young people

A number of parents commented that PACTS workshops should be extended to involve young people. Potential benefits of involving young people in PACTS workshops include increased parent attendance if they can see that it is of direct relevance to their child, and helping parents and teenagers to start a conversation about transitions. One parent commented:

[I would like to see] an evening where the child also attends, to [help] initiate the parent–child discussion and meet the people from the school's career team. (Parent)

Young people's involvement could also help ensure PACTS does have a direct impact on their transitions.

Student involvement could take a variety of forms: from a parallel program for students run by the school to students attending one or all of the three sessions. However, it is important to recognise that for young people to successfully participate in PACTS workshops there would need to be significant changes made to the current workshop format.

### Increasing attendance

As PACTS' success is dependent on reaching parents, attendance rates are a crucial area for further consideration. Maximising the reach of the project can be promoted through research and action in two areas. Ongoing research should be undertaken to refine and improve recruitment and program accessibility. Further, ensuring schools' ongoing participation is essential. This evaluation found that limited attendance rates at a given school can result in that school deciding not to run the program again in the future. This response needs to be explored and mitigated against to allow PACTS to gain momentum at individual schools.

Interviews with key stakeholders, especially parents and PACTS staff, pointed to potential ways to increase attendance. Some parents who were interviewed after attending PACTS commented that before they went they didn't really know what PACTS was about or what benefit it would have for them or their children. This suggests that PACTS advertising could be improved to more clearly state the benefits of attending. Other suggestions that may help increase attendance at PACTS workshops include:

- providing child-care  
It was a shame there wasn't child-care [available] so we both could have gone. (Parent)
- more active promotion (e.g. more telephone calls to parents)
- holding the workshops outside schools, at more accessible and/or neutral venues in order to attract parents who may have poor relationships or negative associations with schools
- altering the length and/or timing of the workshops to cater to more parents, including running mini-PACTS workshops focused on particular transition issues (e.g. TAFE or apprenticeships)
- making PACTS a more predictable feature of the school calendar to aid promotion in student handbooks, and increase normalcy of attending PACTS workshops. Parents should be encouraged to think, 'Everyone does it so I'm expected to!'

I think it'd be good if PACTS was a permanent fixture at the school. This means we could set dates and put it in the student handbook. (Careers/transitions teacher)

Staff at a few schools reported concern and some disappointment about the numbers of parents who attended PACTS at their school. Schools' perceptions of 'good' attendance are important because they affect whether or not they think it worthwhile to continue to offer PACTS at their school. To

address this issue PACTS staff have encouraged schools not to be deterred by low initial attendance, stressing the benefit to every individual who attends a workshop.

One school representative commented that a barrier to maintaining high attendance rates at PACTS was that after a strong initial response to PACTS, now that all of the ‘interested’ parents had done the program it was much more difficult to get ‘decent’ numbers to the workshops. Strategies to reach out to the less ‘interested’ parents need to be further explored.

## Reaching the most disadvantaged

Parents, PACTS staff and school representatives all report that PACTS helps people who attend the workshops. There is little consensus, however, on the question of whether PACTS reaches the most disadvantaged parents in each of the school communities. Many PACTS staff and school representatives say that there are some parents whom the program will never reach—for example, parents who have anxiety disorders or suffer from a mental illness, who do not have easy access to transport or child-care, or parents who are just not interested in thinking about transitions. A few went further and said that the more disadvantaged parents did not attend, or attended very rarely:

We don’t get the ones we want. You can tell by who their kids are. Most of these [people’s] kids are very high achieving, very supported kids. It’s probably not reaching our most disadvantaged families. These parents have had bad experiences at school and don’t want to set foot in the place! (Careers/transitions teacher)

[Do the more disadvantaged parents attend?] I’m not sure whether those people get there. No matter how you market it, they are afraid of being made to look silly. (PACTS Trainer)

One PACTS Liaison Parent stated that a very wide range of parents have attended the PACTS program at her school, including single parents and parents of low socioeconomic status. This variation suggests that different recruitment styles may be impacting on success in encouraging more disadvantaged parents to attend workshops.

It is important to note that 36% of parents who attended PACTS had not completed secondary school and a further 16% had done no further study after completing Year 12. Also, at least 9% of attendees lived in a household where no one had paid employment. These figures highlight the substantial proportion of PACTS attendees who are disadvantaged in employment or educational attainment. This indicates that PACTS is having some success in helping disadvantaged parents to support their children’s transitions.

Parents’ comments suggest that PACTS is less appropriate for people who are uncomfortable in group settings, or people who are after very specific information:

Personally, I’m not very comfortable in a group environment. I would have gained more in a one-to-one situation because I’m not really confident to speak out and ask my questions in a group. (Parent)

I wanted some one-on-one information. I think I should have seen the careers teachers because every time I asked a question they said ‘You’d need to see a careers teacher for that’. My questions were very specific. (Parent)

## Involving more schools

The PACTS pilot found that not all government schools on the Mornington Peninsula were interested in running the program. The PACTS Coordinator believed that schools might resist participating because they were hesitant to engage more actively with parents as they may perceive parents as difficult. Unfortunately, without assistance from schools (for example through school mail outs) it would be very difficult to contact these parents in order to promote PACTS.

Careers teachers may also feel threatened by PACTS. Efforts should be made to explain the goals and scope of PACTS to careers teachers—that it is a complementary program intended to spread the task of supporting young people's career decisions a bit more broadly—and reassuring them that their highly specialised knowledge will still be in great demand.

### **Parents' suggested improvements**

Parents were asked in the follow-up questionnaire, and in the telephone interviews, if there were things about the workshops they did not like or that could be improved. The vast majority of respondents had no problems with the workshops, many commenting that they were very informative and well run. Problems or dislikes that were mentioned by participants included that they covered too much information to absorb or included too many handouts, and that discussions got 'off track' or some information was not relevant:

[Were there any things you didn't like?] I'd prefer to have one-to-one sessions rather than a group thing to get direct answers for what I needed. (Parent)

I felt that no-one could give me the information I wanted on the school systems in other states. (Parent)

A few parents commented that the first workshop 'felt a bit unfocused at the start'. One parent said 'they got more informative and I was glad I stuck it out'. One was discouraged from attending any more by the workshop's focus on the parents' experiences:

I didn't know what they were really about. I thought 'What are they for? Why am I here?'  
If it improved, if it was more focused on the kids and not on me, it could be really good.  
But it was just falling back on my past and my background and I never really had any full-time jobs in the past ... it was too much on me. (Parent)

In response to parent and trainer feedback, this section of the workshop program has now been moved into the second workshop, enabling parents to become more comfortable and relaxed with each other before broaching topics which can be considered confronting by some less confident parents.

One further suggested improvement was providing more information about the school:

[I would like to see] more school based knowledge ... what can be organised through the school, meet the careers teacher, [get] more details on school-based apprenticeships, and what we can do if my child wants out at the end of Year 9. (Parent)

## 9 Conclusion and recommendations

The role of parents within young people's transitions networks is a critical area that is presently neglected in transition support programs in Australia. Results from our research indicate that parents have significant influence in transition decision making and are one of the most consulted and important sources of post-school information and advice. Other research discussed above (see Chapter 2) indicates that increased parental involvement is likely to lead to more intensive and effective information seeking, increased engagement in career exploratory behaviour and consideration of diverse career options.

The Mornington Peninsula is an area characterised by high youth unemployment and significant pockets of socio-economic disadvantage—that is, an area where transitions from school to work or further education are particularly risky. A parent's support can mean the difference between a successful transition and unemployment. Almost all of the parents who completed the initial PACTS questionnaire felt that it was important to be involved in their children's transition decisions. However, just 11% of parents felt that they knew enough about post-school options to help. This is the information gap PACTS aims to fill.

While it is too early to measure actual transitions outcomes, indirect evidence indicates that PACTS is contributing to more successful transitions for young people. Our findings demonstrate the key benefits of PACTS so far include improved and increased communication between parents and young people, better parent understanding of transition options, increased confidence in their capacity to assist their children and increased access to transitions information. In particular, our early findings and overseas research highlight the link between parent confidence in their knowledge about transitions and the likelihood that they will talk to their children and support them to make informed decisions about transitions.

Further, our research with young people found that parents already occupy an important role in young people's transition networks, being the group they were most likely to have talked to about transition options, ahead of teachers, friends, careers counsellors or other family members, and the group they would most like to talk to, after careers counsellors. Young people also reported wanting their parents to be open to their ideas and supportive of their transition decisions. This fits well with many parents' comments about what they gained from PACTS: the knowledge that ultimately transition decisions are the young person's to make, and the fact that they are less stressed and worried about young people's transitions because they see the breadth of options available.

While the vast majority of parents reported benefiting from PACTS, the strong positive correlation between parents' education level and the discussion of post-school options indicates that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, whose parents are likely to have lower levels of education, are likely to miss out on this crucial support without programs such as PACTS. This argument is supported by overseas research indicating that providing transitions information and support to parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds is an effective way to assist children to achieve their education and career potential (Trusty 1998). And while it is unclear whether PACTS reaches the most disadvantaged parents in any given school community, it is important to note that it is effective in reaching parents with limited education. Over 50% of parents who attended PACTS between 2003 and 2005 had Year 12 or lower as their highest level of education.

In terms of program design, this and other research suggests that programs should aim to assist parents to:

- understand careers and the labour market
- know how to access and use transitions resources

- understand their influence in the transition process
- engage with and support children in a positive way.

Key design and delivery features which contributed to the success of PACTS were using small group, interactive workshops; providing relevant information in digestible chunks; initiating and maintaining positive relationships with schools; using skilled and knowledgeable facilitators; using intensive recruitment practices, particularly phone calls to parents; and ensuring workshop design is responsive to parent feedback. Other elements that were identified as important were providing a wide range of information, and support and opportunities for parents to meet and share experiences. This last point had not been identified in research elsewhere.

The PACTS workshops were well liked by parents who attended. However, the desire by over 90% of parents to discuss their child's options individually should also be noted and be built into any strategy to support parents. Although resource-intensive, this may be particularly worthwhile in schools with many parents from low socioeconomic groups, where lower levels of parent education correlate with less support for young people's transition decisions. In addition, just under 60% of parent participants also felt that receiving printed information by post would be useful. This may be a means of reaching parents who have reasonable literacy skills but are unable or unwilling to attend group sessions.

This evaluation has shown that the PACTS pilot project has benefited parents on the Mornington Peninsula, increasing their knowledge base and confidence around transitions, by providing them with information and skills. Our findings uphold the PACTS premise that the benefits of informing and upskilling parents will ultimately flow on to successful transitions for their children.

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