



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

***Supporting young people's
career transition choices:
the role of parents***

**Interim evaluation of the Parents As Career
Transition Supports (PACTS) program**

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1 Introduction

The Brotherhood's Parents as Career and Transition Supports (PACTS) program aims to better equip parents to assist their children in deciding what to do after finishing school. This is part of an investment strategy that hopes to ensure that young people are able to move to appropriate post-school options and avoid the social exclusion associated with unemployment and inactivity.

This report explores the existing research on parents and career transition and the results obtained to date from the program evaluation. The findings that are reported here come from surveys completed by parents and young people from two PACTS program delivery sites (Mornington Peninsula, Victoria and Alice Springs, Northern Territory), focus groups conducted with parents and workshop evaluation forms completed by parents. A follow-up survey will be carried out with parents during the second half of 2005.

2 Parents and transitions

The way that young people transition from school to work or further training is an important social and economic issue. Young people leaving school early, without alternative career paths, face long-term disadvantages in terms of higher levels of unemployment, lower incomes and an increased likelihood of ending up in low-skill jobs with poor conditions and few opportunities for advancement. 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 an area that is starting to receive increased attention. The Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Taskforce (2001) recognised that parents guide many of the decisions taken by young people in their transition pathways and that supporting families is one of the best ways to help young people through career transition.

Parent 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'. These findings are echoed by Taylor, Harris and Taylor (2004, p.1) who 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. 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' (1997, p.72). They argue for a re-conceptualisation of transition decision making from being regarded as something that is undertaken by an individual to being understood as something that is 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 seek to support joint as well as individual action (1997, p.84).

Trusty (1998) suggests that, particularly in the case of low socio-economic 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 who have been 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 both boys and girls indicated that they considered their parents influence to be positive.

In a cross-sectional study of juniors from six high schools in North Carolina, Otto (2000) found that mothers were the group that young people were most likely to turn to 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 'the opportunity [exists] ... to develop ways to multiply [our] effectiveness by working with parents to help young people make career decisions' (p.118).

Helping parents support their children

Some work has also been done looking at 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 ability to be independent 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 them 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.

The development of 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).

Developing programs

Many of the authors listed above call for transition programs that seek to encourage parental involvement in supporting their children's transition decision making. They argue that:

- Parents need to be made aware that they have an important role in transitions and are one of the most influential and most often consulted sources of transitions information and advice. (Taylor 1997; Trusty 1998; Kracke 2001; Way & Rossmann 1996; Otto 2000).
- Parents need to be encouraged to understand the conversations they have with their children about careers as one of the most important and formative places for self-investigation, value-forming, career exploration and decision making (Paa & McWhirter 2000; Young 1997; Taylor 1997, Kracke 1997, 2001; Way & Rossmann 1996).
- Parents need access to the career resources that are available to their children so that they can provide informed and accurate advice and support (Paa & McWhirter 2000; Taylor 1997; Trusty 1998; Russell & Wardman 1998).

3 PACTS model

Funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), the Brotherhood of St Laurence's PACTS program is one of 22 Career and Transition pilot projects throughout Australia, but is distinctive in its focus on parents, since the other pilot projects focus on and work with young people. PACTS recognises that parents have a key role in supporting their child's successful transition from school to work or further education, but often lack up-to-date information or knowledge about career and transition options, and that resources to assist them may be hard to obtain or interpret. Accordingly it provides appropriate information, skills, and support through interactive workshops and printed materials to give parents the skills to make a positive contribution to their child's transition decision making process. The program is offered through 11 schools to parents of students in years 7–12. As of July 2004, 38 workshops had been delivered on the Mornington Peninsula by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, to a total of 336 parents; 110 of these parents have been surveyed.

Initial information sessions give parents information about the PACTS program and the three two-hour workshops offered. They are able to attend one or all of the workshops, and can redo the workshops as many times as they wish. The three workshops cover the following areas:

Workshop One

- Parenting skills for career transition
- Finding a place to start

Workshop Two

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

Workshop Three

- Tackling the employment market
- Preparing for employment.

Initially the BSL's PACTS program was based on a Train the Trainer model that sought to train parents to deliver workshops to other parents. However it was found that the job of delivering the workshops required more training than was practical. Five professionals are now employed as Parent Trainers to deliver the PACTS workshops. The workshops have been designed by the BSL's PACTS Coordinator, Mary Tresize-Brown, whose role includes developing and enhancing workshop material, delivering some workshops and training and supporting parents to act as PACTS Liaison Workers.

The Liaison Workers take responsibility for organising the PACTS program in their school, acting as a conduit between the school, parents and the PACTS Coordinator. The Liaison Workers are able to put notices in school newsletters, send invitations home with students, and encourage parents to attend the workshops by answering any queries. They also organise room bookings. The PACTS liaison role is paid and supported through regular meetings with the PACTS Coordinator.

The material for delivering the PACTS program has been made available to CATS providers around the country. As well as reporting on data from the Brotherhood's PACTS program on the Mornington Peninsula, this report includes results from the surveys completed by students and parents who have participated in the PACTS program delivered by the CATS provider in Alice Springs.

How does PACTS shape up?

The PACTS program responds well to the issues identified in the literature. By participating in the PACTS program, parents:

- are alerted to the scope and importance of their role in transition decision making, and are encouraged to communicate with their children in an ongoing fashion
- gain strategies for communicating with adolescents
- learn how to encourage and support their children to explore their interests and motivations and how to link these interests to broad occupational categories
- are equipped to use career resources such as the Job Guide to help their children explore their interests
- learn how to find and pursue training and employment pathways that fit the unique and changing needs and interests of their children
- are familiarised with the range of career resources that are available to their children
- learn about the youth labour market.

4 Parent survey results

An initial survey was undertaken when parents first attended a PACTS workshop at various locations. The results of this survey are reported here and will be compared with a follow-up survey that will be carried out over 2005. This comparison will seek to measure the impact of the PACTS program on parents' confidence and ability to access transitions material and their involvement in their child's transition.

Results presented below utilise data collected from 110 parents from the Mornington Peninsula and 18 parents from Alice Springs who have completed the first survey. It explores these parents' levels of involvement in their children's transitions, their views about the importance of being involved, perceptions of their ability to access information and provide good advice, and their interest in gaining greater access to information about training and career pathways.

Parent characteristics

The vast majority (73%) of the parents who were surveyed were in the 40–49 age group (see Table 4.1) and around 90% of survey respondents were female.

Table 4.1 Parent age

Age of parent, years	Age group as % of total
30–39	14%
40–49	73%
50–59	7%
60+	1%
Not given	7%

Percentages add to more than 100 due to rounding.

In just under 80% of families the primary income earner was in full-time work, although in around 10% of families there was no parent in paid work (see Table 4.2).

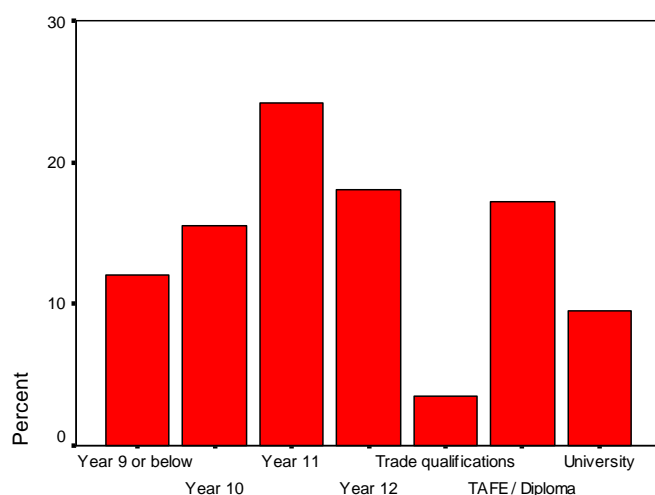
Table 4.2 Employment status of main income earner

Employment status	%
Working full time	79%
Working part time	10%
No work	10%
Not given	2%

Percentages add to more than 100 due to rounding.

The level of education of the parent completing the survey (mostly mothers) varied significantly, as can be seen in Figure 4.1; however the majority (around 52%) had year 11 or lower as their highest level of education, while for a further 18% the completion of year 12 was the highest level of education.

Figure 4.1 Highest level of education of survey respondent



Level of education - self

It is worth noting, however, that among the partners (mainly fathers) of the parent completing the survey, the percentage holding trade qualifications was much higher (almost 30%) and the percentage with year 11 as their highest level of education was significantly lower (36%).

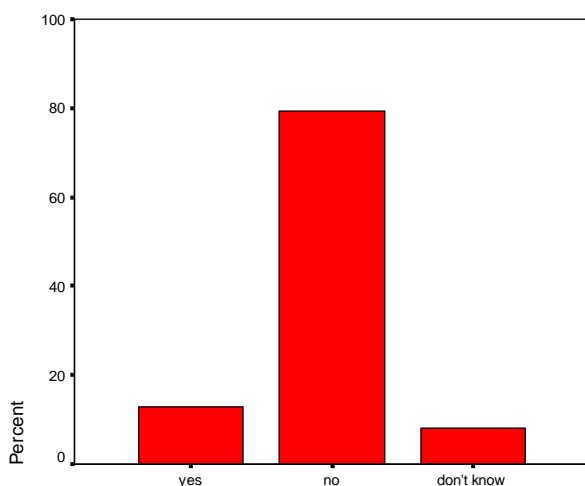
Parents and transition

Involvement in transition decision making

Almost 100% of parents indicated that they believe it is important to be involved in their child’s decision about what to do after finishing school and around 70% of parents had already discussed post-school options with their child before attending the PACTS workshops.

However, despite being keen to be involved and having already talked with their children, 79% of parents reported feeling that they do not know enough about employment and education choices to help their child make a decision about what to do after finishing school (Figure 4.2). A further 8% reported that they did not know if they knew enough and only 13% said that they *do* know enough about post-school options to help their child make a decision.

Figure 4.2 Do parents feel that they know enough to help their children make a decision about what to do after finishing school?



Around 70% of the parents listed specific concerns about their child’s move from school to work or further education and training, and 67% of parents reported that their children had wanted their advice and input on what to do after leaving school. This is in line with research, discussed above, showing that parents occupy a central position in their children’s information networks about post school options.

As Table 4.3 indicates, most parents (78%) reported that their oldest child currently at school was planning to complete year 12; however a significant minority (14%) did not know how long their child was planning to stay at school.

Table 4.3 How long does your oldest child plan to stay at school?

Year level	Percentage
Complete year 12	78%
Leave after year 11	2%
Leave after year 10	5%
Don’t know	14%
No response	1%

The largest number of parents reported that their child is undecided about what they want to do after leaving school (see Table 4.4). The next largest group of parents reported that their child wants to go to university, followed by the group who reported that their child wants to get an apprenticeship or traineeship. The same number of parents indicated that their child either doesn’t

know what they want to do, or that their child has another option in mind that is not on the list. The smallest number of parents indicated that their child wants to go to TAFE or gain full-time employment when they leave school. The significance of these figures is that the largest percentage of parents indicated that their children are undecided about what they will do after leaving school. There is therefore a high need for these parents to be able to support their children in accessing information about a broad range of options and in researching the specifics of various post-school pathways.

Table 4.4 What does your child want to do after they leave school?

What does your child want to do when he/she leaves school?	Percentage of parent responses
Not decided	33%
University	27%
Apprenticeship/traineeship	11%
Other specified	9%
Don't know	9%
TAFE	6%
Full-time employment	6%

Percentages add to more than 100 due to rounding

Parent characteristics and involvement in transition decision making

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

- A positive and significant ($r=0.36$ sig.=0.000) relationship was found between the education level of the person filling in the survey and having discussed post-school options and a positive and significant ($r=0.27$ sig.=0.007) relationship was also found between the partner's level of education and having discussed post-school options.

This relationship is visible in Table 4.5 (below). While only 1 out of 32 parents (around 3%) with university, TAFE / diploma or trade qualifications had *not* discussed post-school options with their children, 29 out of 81 parents (around 35%) with year 12 education or below had *not* discussed post-school options with their children. This represents a tenfold increase in the likelihood of parents *not* discussing post-school options with their children if they have no post-secondary education. Interestingly, however, parents' highest level of education and whether they feel they know enough about post-school options were not significantly related.

Table 4.5 Parents' highest level of education and discussion of career options

Highest level of education	Discussed career options		Total
	No	Yes	
Year 9	8	6	14
Year 10	6	12	18
Year 11	8	20	28
Year 12	7	14	21
Trade	0	4	4
TAFE / diploma	1	17	18
University	0	11	11
Total	30	84	114

A positive and significant relationship was also found between parents' age and the feeling that they know enough to help their children ($r=0.23$, sig.=0.011), perhaps because parents had learnt from previous children going through transitions. A positive and significant relationship was also evident between parents feeling they know enough and having discussed post-school options

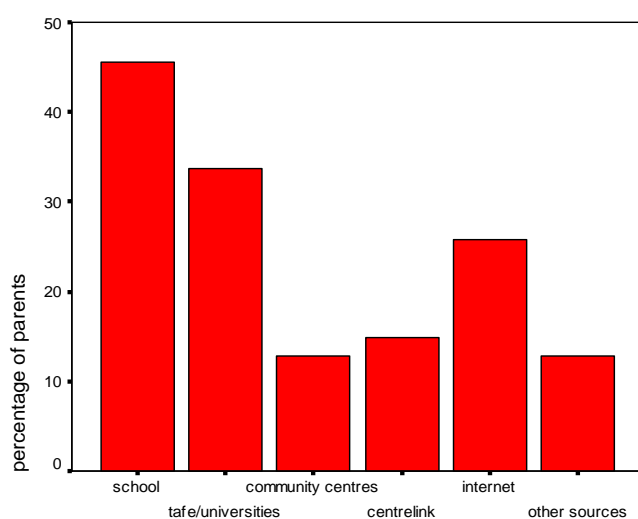
($r=0.21$, $sig.=0.017$), indicating that programs that can increase parents' knowledge and understanding should have a positive impact by increasing discussion with their children.

Parents and information

Perceptions about the availability of information

Overall parents did *not* feel that information about post-school options was easily accessible (see Figure 4.3). Information was seen as most readily accessible from their child's school; however this perception was held by less than half of parents (around 45%). This was followed by TAFE and universities, from which around a third of parents felt information was readily accessible, then the internet at just under 30%. Centrelink, community centres, and 'other sources' were all seen as having readily accessible information about post-school options by just over 10% of parents.

Figure 4.3 Percentage of parents who believe that information about post-school options is readily available from various sources



What would parents like more information about?

When asked to nominate from a list which kind of information they were most interested in knowing more about (see Table 4.6), all parents ticked at least one box, and many ticked several. Parents wanted a wide range of information; however the two areas most commonly specified were apprenticeships / traineeships and TAFE courses.

Table 4.6 Information sought by parents

Information type	Percentage of parents seeking information specifically about this option
Apprenticeships/traineeships	58%
TAFE courses	56%
Types of jobs that are available	51%
University courses	49%
School careers services	43%
Job search skills and training	39%
Employment agencies	27%
All of the above options	34%

What assistance would parents find useful?

Parents were asked to indicate whether the following types of assistance would be useful to them when helping their child make a decision about what to do after leaving school (see table 4.7).

Table 4.7 Useful assistance

Service	Percentage of parents who would find this useful
Having a person with whom to discuss their child's options	92%
Information sessions to address parents' questions and concerns	67%
Information sessions with speakers from industry or education	59%
Receiving written material and information by post	57%
Information on the internet	38%
Visits to employment agencies/Centrelink	31%
Other	4%

In terms of providing support to parents, the clear preference was having a person with whom to discuss their child's options individually, which was selected by 92% of parents as useful. However, information sessions to address parents' questions and concerns were the second most popular option and were selected by two-thirds of parents. Over half of parents also indicated that information sessions with speakers from industry or education and receiving written materials by post would be useful. Given the limited resources available for career counselling, information sessions to address parents' concerns seem to be an effective avenue for providing assistance.

5 Student survey results

Student surveys were filled out by students in schools where PACTS was delivered to parents. Students were asked about what they plan to do after they leave school, who they turn to for advice and information about post-school options and what types of information they seek. This information is currently limited by the small number of surveys conducted.

Surveys were filled out by students from schools on the Mornington Peninsula and one school in Alice Springs (Anzac Hill High School). However, as surveys distributed were not exactly the same, the aggregation or direct comparison of responses to some questions has not been possible.

More than half the surveys returned so far have been from Alice Springs and the opinions of these students differ in some respects from views of students from the Mornington Peninsula.

Student characteristics

Of forty-seven student returned surveys, 68% were male, 38% were female, and 4% did not specify. While the sample included students in years 7 to 12, the significant majority (72%) were in year 10 (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Year level of students completing surveys

Year level	Number of students	Percentage of total
Year 7	1	2%
Year 8	4	9%
Year 9	2	4%
Year 10	34	72%
Year 11	1	2%
Year 12	5	11%
Missing*	11	–

* These students are not included in the calculation of the valid percentage.

Twenty-eight students attended Anzac Hill High School in Alice Springs, and eighteen students attended the following five schools on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria:

Table 5.2 shows the responses to questions about school leaving from parents and students. The results should be treated with caution as they do not necessarily come from matching households. Some 77% of students reported that they were planning to stay at school until the end of Year 12. A similar percentage of parents (76%) reporting that their child wanted to complete year 12. While 20% of students reported that they were planning to finish school after years 10 or 11, only around 7% of parents reported that their child was planning to leave after years 10 or 11. Moreover, while only 4% of students stated that they did not know when they wanted to leave school, around 16% of parents did not know when their child was planning to finish school. These results indicate the possibility of a breakdown in communication about transition planning with those students that are planning to leave before the end of year 12, for whom support is probably even more important.

Table 5.2 How long are you/is your child planning to stay at school?

Year level	Percentage of students	Percentage of parents
Complete year 12	77%	76%
Leave after year 11	9%	2%
Leave after year 10	11%	5%
Don't know	4%	16%

Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

What do students want to do when they leave school?

Students were asked what they would like to do when they leave school (see Table 5.3). Some students marked only one post-school option listed, perhaps because they had a clear preference: the largest such group was those who wanted to go to university. Other students ticked multiple options: this might indicate uncertainty about their own direction, or intention to do several things in succession (for example work for a time, then take up further education or training).

Table 5.3 What would students like to do when they leave school?

Post-school options	Number who only ticked this post-school option	Number who ticked this option <i>and also</i> other options	Total number of ticks	Percentage of students ticking this option
University	14	5	19	40%
Apprenticeship/traineeship	8	4	12	26%
Work full-time	4	6	10	21%
TAFE	1	7	8	17%
Don't know	5	3	8	17%
Multiple ticks		11		23%

Transition support

Just over half of students indicated that they want more information about work and study options available after leaving school (Table 5.4); however many students went to the trouble of specifying the kind of information that they need, indicating that they are actively seeking support.

Table 5.4 Would you like more information about post-school options?

Yes	54%
No	36%
Don't know	10%

Students from Mornington Peninsula schools were given the option of describing, in their own words, the kind of information or advice that they would find most helpful. The responses varied widely and included requests for information or help regarding:

- courses and qualifications in specific areas
- open days
- finding employment and what jobs pay
- financial support
- subject selection.
- general information.

Who have students talked to?

When asked who they had already talked to about post-school options, 72% reported that that had already spoken to their parents (Table 5.5). This was higher than all other options. The next most commonly consulted group of people were teachers (by 55% of students), then friends (by 47% of students). Significantly, these results support the findings of similar surveys conducted overseas, concluding that parents are the most commonly consulted source of information for students who are making transition decisions.

Table 5.5 Who have you already talked to about what you would like to do after leaving school?

Students were asked to tick <i>one or more</i> of the following options:	Number of students who ticked yes	Percentage of students
Parents	34	72%
Teachers	26	55%
Friends	22	47%
Careers counsellor	18	38%
Other family members	17	36%

Who would students *like* to talk to?

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 (74%) (see Table 5.6). However parents were the second most highly rated group, with 63% of students saying they would like to talk to them about post-school options. The advice of parents is clearly in high demand by these students and it could be assumed that compared with a careers counsellor, parents would be better placed to provide the time-consuming ongoing support that is required.

Table 5.6 Who would you like to talk to for information and advice about what to do after leaving school?

Students were asked to tick <i>one or more</i> of the following options:	Number of students who ticked yes	Percentage
Careers counsellor	14	74%
Parents	12	63%
Teachers	11	55%
Friends	10	53%
Other family members	8	42%
A transition worker	6	32%

What have students talked to their parents about?

The most common topic which students from the Mornington Peninsula had talked to their parents about was the types of jobs that are available (see Table 5.7). This is of some concern, given anecdotal evidence that parents' advice about first entering employment is often based on their own transition experience a number of decades earlier. When combined, information about post-compulsory education including TAFE/university and apprenticeships/traineeships was discussed by an equally large number of students, 61%. Few students had talked with parents about job search skills or Centrelink.

Table 5.7 Have you talked to your parents about the following? [Mornington Peninsula]

Students were asked to tick <i>one or more</i> of the following options:	Number of students who ticked yes	Percentage of students
Types of jobs available	11	61%
TAFE/university courses	7	39%
Apprenticeships/traineeships	4	22%
Job search skills	2	11%
Centrelink	1	6%

Students from Anzac Hill were asked if they would like information or advice from their parents about the list of post-school options (see Table 5.8); arguably this implies that the parents are the source of the actual information rather than a good sounding board for exploring thoughts about post-school options.

The responses from Anzac Hill indicate that students would be most interested in receiving information and advice from their parents on apprenticeships and traineeships and about the types of jobs that are available. However combining all post-compulsory education options (apprenticeships/traineeships and TAFE/university) this becomes the area that students are most interested in receiving information (78%).

Table 5.8 Would students like to receive information and advice from their parents? [Anzac Hill]

Students were asked to tick <i>one or more</i> of the following types of information and advice:	Number of students who ticked yes	Percentage
Information or advice about apprenticeships/traineeships	11	41%
Advice or information from your parents about types of jobs available.	11	41%
Information or advice about TAFE/university	10	37%
Advice or information about job search skills and training.	6	22%
Advice or information about employment agencies/Centrelink.	5	19%

Would students like help from their parents?

Students were also asked whether they would like to receive help from their parents in deciding what to do after finishing school. However, again the question was different for Anzac Hill students. This variation leaves room for divergent interpretations and makes direct comparison difficult. Arguably the question asked of the Anzac Hill students implies a greater level of parental authority over the students' decision, whereas the question for students in Mornington Peninsula schools asks them to consider the desirability of parents taking on a supportive role. This difference may explain why students from the Mornington Peninsula seem more enthusiastic about their parents' involvement in their decision making (Table 5.9), and suggests that while students are keen for parent involvement they are looking for support which leaves the ultimate decision with them.

Table 5.9 Do students want their parents' help?

School	Question	Percentage of students indicating yes
Anzac Hill	Would you like your parents to be involved in your decision about what to do after leaving school?	48%
Mornington Peninsula schools	Would you like help from your parents in deciding about what to do after leaving school?	79%

In addition to these specific questions, students were given the chance to provide a written answer to a question asking how their parents could best help them to decide what they would like to do after finishing school. Interestingly, most of the students who answered this question wanted their parents to become better informed (Table 5.10). The next most common responses involved a desire for their parents to engage in supportive conversations with them.

Table 5.10 Other ways in which parents can help

Categorised student responses	Number of responses
Become better informed	7
Talk to me and support me in whatever I want to do	4
Support and guide	1
Take me to university open days	1
Help me to get apprenticeships and jobs I'm interested in	1
Encourage me	1
Help me to find out information about TAFE and university courses	1

These findings—that children want to talk to their parents, that they want their parents' support in exploring the options they are considering and that they rely upon their parents for logistical support such as for driving them to university open days—mirror the findings of overseas research. Such findings strongly suggest 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.

What information and advice-seeking processes would students like to be involved in with their parents?

Although a complete comparison is not possible students from the Mornington Peninsula seemed more likely to want their parents' involvement. Questions that *are* directly comparable are shaded in grey in Tables 5.11 and 5.12.

Students from the Mornington Peninsula and from Anzac Hill both indicated their strongest preference was to discuss written careers information with their parents themselves; however this was significantly greater for students on the Mornington Peninsula.

A significant number of students from the Mornington Peninsula also indicated that they would find 'having their parents present at school information sessions' and 'having parents present at meetings with the careers teacher' helpful.

Interestingly, significantly fewer students from Anzac Hill (only 15%) thought that having their parents present at school information sessions or at meetings with the careers teacher would be helpful. Further exploration over the remainder of the project will be required to understand this difference.

Table 5.11 Helpful activities: Mornington Peninsula students' responses

Students were asked to tick <i>one or more</i> of the following suggested activities:	Number of students who ticked yes	Percentage
Discussing written information with your parents yourself	12	63%
Having your parents present at school information sessions	10	53%
Having your parents present at meetings with the careers teacher	9	47%
Having a transition worker to talk with you and your parents about career options	4	22%
None of the above options would be helpful	1	5.4%

Table 5.12 Helpful activities: Anzac Hill student responses

Students were asked to tick <i>one or more</i> of the following suggested activities:	Number of students who ticked yes	Percentage of students
Discussing written information with your parents yourself	13	48%
Having your parents present at school information sessions	4	15%
Having your parents present at meetings with the careers teacher	4	15%
Having a careers counsellor talk with you and your parents about career options	8	30%
None of the above options would be helpful	10	7%

Additional comments

Two students took up the invitation to make additional comments. While one felt both his parents could teach him useful skills, the other felt her mother would be unable to help much:

Mum hasn't been in the workforce for a long time. She doesn't have much understanding of today's education system, or how to get into courses of my choice. Until she has more of an understanding I am reluctant to confide in her, preferring to talk to the careers counsellor.

6 PACTS workshop evaluation

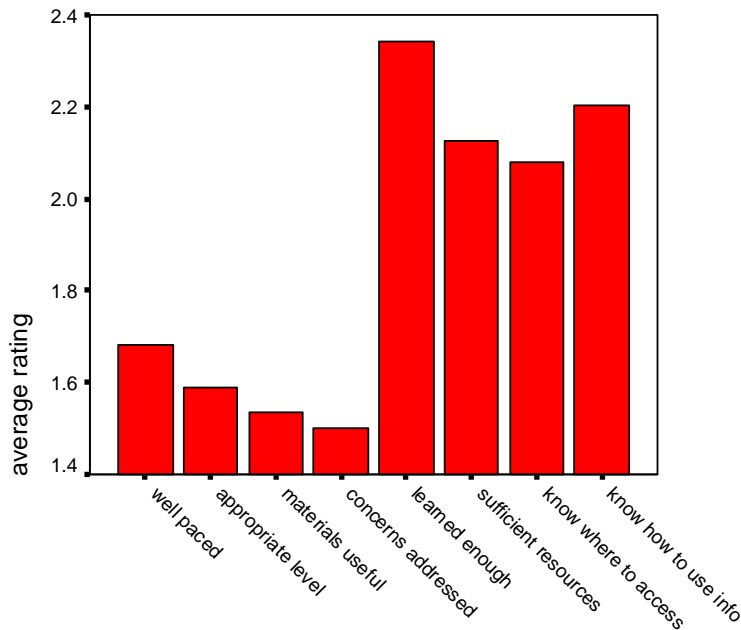
The following data is drawn from the analysis of 70 Parent Workshop Evaluation surveys that were filled in by parents who attended PACTS workshops on the Mornington Peninsula.

To assist in the ongoing development of the program and to determine the effectiveness of the workshops, parents were asked for feedback after completing PACTS workshops. They were asked to rate statements such as those below on a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

- The workshop was well paced.
- The workshop was aimed at an appropriate level for me.
- The workshop materials were useful and easy to understand.
- My concerns/questions were addressed by the trainer.
- I have learned enough about careers and transition options to be confident in supporting my child with career and transition decisions.
- I have been provided with sufficient resources to support my new knowledge on career and transition options.
- I know where to access additional information on career and transition options.
- I am clear on how to use this information with my child.

Figure 6.1 shows that parents were very positive about the running of the workshops, with the average rating between 1 (strongly agree) and 2 (agree) for statements that: the workshops were well-paced; were at an appropriate level; and the materials were useful. Ratings were lower (averaging between 3 (neutral) and 2 (agree)) for questions asking whether parents feel they know enough to support their child; have been provided with sufficient resources; know where to access additional information; and know how to use the information. This suggests ongoing support may be required.

Figure 6.1 Parent workshop ratings
(where rating of 1=strongly agree and 5=strongly disagree)



Workshop evaluation surveys have revealed a broad, positive response from the parents who participated. Parents indicated that the most helpful aspects of the workshops were:

- learning how to use the Job Guide, (the careers handbook supplied to Victorian school students by the Department of Education Science and Training)¹.

'Discovering the Job Guide was most useful part of the workshop, all take-home material has been most welcome.'

- sharing experiences with other parents

'Listening to other parents and knowing that we are not alone with this careers dilemma.'

'Working in groups and getting a different perspective on matters.'

- learning how to use occupational categories to identify job roles that suit their child's personality and interests.

'The six categories of occupations—I can't wait to explore my son's interests.'

- learning new ways to access information.

'Knowing all the different places to look for employment, finding websites.'

'There are many doors to investigate. Don't stop at the first door.'

¹ The Job Guide is designed to provide a guide to 'occupations, and their education and training pathways' (DEST 2004). It uses occupational categories as a career development tool, and explains how to match skills and interests to these categories. It then directs users to appropriate information.

- learning strategies to help communicate with adolescents.

‘Learning about how to help and guide our children, not push them.’

This feedback echoes the findings of other research discussed above, that teaching parents how to use career resources (such as the Job Guide) and giving them an understanding of some of the tools of career decision making (linking occupational categories to the students’ interests and personality) will help them provide transition support. Significantly, our findings reveal some strategies for helping parents feel more capable of providing transition support that are not highlighted in other research. We find here that parents consider the opportunity to share their experiences with other parents as one of the most helpful aspects of the PACTS workshops. In addition, parents have welcomed the opportunity to learn strategies for communicating with adolescents, and nominated this as another of the most helpful aspects of the workshops.

When asked if they had ‘any additional comments’, parents were overwhelmingly positive:

‘Great program—need more of them [workshops].’

‘I would recommend this to anybody with year 8 or later year children.’

‘I enjoyed tonight’s session—gained some worthwhile ideas to work on.’

‘I look forward to completing the next two weeks of courses.’

‘So far—I have found the program encouraging and I am looking forward to the rest of the workshops.’

This suggests that word-of-mouth will provide a good foundation for future growth of the program.

7 Focus groups

Focus groups were run to gather in-depth information regarding participants’ perceptions of PACTS’ usefulness and the ways that it has changed their ability to support their children’s transition decision making.

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

Many comments were very positive:

‘It’s opened a whole spectrum of information for me, it’s blown my mind. I can’t believe how much information I’ve gained. I mean it’s just such a learning curve, the little bit of information that’s available in this book [the Job Guide] just points the way and you really just sort of choose the way you want to go then. It’s just fantastic.’

‘I’m so glad I did it, unbelievably, because I just knew nothing, and I guess I’m not so worried now because I know that there is so much out there’

‘[You might get transition options information] if you stumble into the information session but if you’re like me and you wave at the school as you drive past, it just doesn’t happen’

Findings

Transforming parent-child interaction

One overwhelming theme that emerged from the focus groups is the effect that feeling hopeful and empowered about career decisions has had on the parent-child relationship. Parents reported that the skills and knowledge that they gained through participating in PACTS gave them confidence in their ability to act to support their children to positively transform various situations that would previously have represented a crisis. Parents reported that participation in PACTS had dispelled feelings of powerlessness. These feelings had often been caused by an experience of being unable to act to facilitate positive outcomes in the lives of their older children. This feeling of powerlessness was typified by the perception that there was an absence of choices or options for their children, and that as parents they did not have the know-how or power to open doors or access information about choices or to envisage positive futures. For this reason parents reported that the gain in knowledge and change in focus that they derived from participating in PACTS took a lot of the anxiety and tension away from the parent-child interaction regarding post-school options.

Learning about alternatives

Parents reported that participation in the PACTS program meant that they gained the ability to help their children find a wider range of post-school options, which they hadn't previously been aware of:

'My focus was VCE, VCE, VCE and then look at your options but ...he was getting quite painful about wanting to leave school...I knew from experience [with an older child] that that whole year can be a waste of time if they don't want to be there, so he left school and he's doing a traineeship and it's been a relief to me knowing that that was an option and knowing that traineeships can lead on to a diploma and lead onto a degree if you want it to, that those doors weren't shut...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 you've got lots of fantastic options out there.'

'[After participating in the PACTS program I have] more confidence in general, I have a daughter who was doing really well in year 10 but said to me before the end of last year, "I have to leave school at the end of year 10 because I want to be a hairdresser, and that's the way you do it", and I went, "Oh, hang on a minute", and I was able to get more specific. I've always said "Don't cut off your options" but had no idea what to say after that. But [after PACTS] I was able to look into it. My eldest one said, "I want to do photography, but I've looked up in the book and there's no course", and I said "Actually it's usually under something else, under an art course or whatever". When that just came out of my mouth without thinking, I was able to say yep I learnt that [through PACTS].'

Parents felt more comfortable and confident to encourage their children to explore different ways of accessing fields of study and work that at first seemed unfamiliar or out of reach:

'When your child's thinking of something that none of the family has ever done, at least you can just lay it out on the table and say, "Well this is what you're looking at", and you have the information to talk about it.'

'Knowing that there are lots of options out there and not stopping them from dreaming of doing things that you wouldn't have on your list of things to do'

Improved communication

Parents felt that they were able to respond and interact with their children in new, more productive ways. They felt encouraged to have conversations about post-school options even when this was difficult:

'My youngest one he has in mind that he wants to become a mechanic ... My husband and I said, "Don't go there, you'll hurt your back, you'll do this, you'll do that", but at the PACTS course I learnt don't do that because we're fighting against what he's wanting to do. Now we're going with it and he's quite good with that and now he realises that you have to have a lot of computer skills to become a mechanic these days and he's pretty eager with that. So it's helped us to say, "Back off and let them say what they want to say and go along with it". We were pretty concerned when they bring something up that just doesn't seem right and now we're not so worried.'

'Instead of being over-helpful, and organising his work experience for him, I just sat and listened to him and 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], I would have done too much for him.'

'Even if a child is difficult or they have already made a decision, ... [using the skills taught in the PACTS workshops] parents can operate as a useful sounding board. [Even] if the child has already made a decision [parents learn to ask] "Tell me about your decision". Kids learn that parents are interested and supportive of their decisions.'

Reduced anxiety

Parents expressed relief from anxiety and stress caused by worrying that their child may make the wrong choice or may fail to achieve their goals:

'My year 8 son wants to be a doctor ... he doesn't know anything about anything else, that's all he's focused on at the moment and that worries me, because I don't want him to be disappointed ... I'm trying to get him to think of other things because I think it's a bit ambitious ... we'll see how he goes. [PACTS] has helped me in understanding that there is more out there than just university and TAFE so that's good.'

'It has helped me with my year 11 student because I was worried about her, whether she'll stay on target to university to be a teacher which is what she has in mind [or not]. She's not very dedicated at the moment and I really liked getting all the information that we can refer to if she's not going to go that way ... [Now we can find out] what else there is so I feel like I'm equipped. I'm not saying to her, "You're not going to make it" ... [Now] we've got other things to go for.'

Capacity to deal with failure or disappointment

Parents reported that after participating in PACTS they were better equipped to deal with disappointment. If their children couldn't take the most obvious step towards their desired career (because they didn't get a high enough ENTER score, for example), PACTS empowered parents to access information that would provide their children with alternative pathways to that career even if the first option wasn't realised:

'If you don't make it into university [now, with this new information, you can say] 'I can do this [instead]' so that [you] know that there are options and if [you] don't get into university it's not the end of the world.'

'The ones who know that they will probably never get the marks for university, they can say, "Well I'll spend a couple of years doing it another way but I'll get there".'

Understanding the Job Guide

Parents were overwhelmingly positive about the importance of being shown how to use the Job Guide. Just being given the guide wasn't enough. Parents reported that it was very valuable to them that they work through how to use it:

'I found that with my year 11 student, she was given those books last year, a week before they had to decide [on subjects], so her and I went through all of that ... [but] we didn't know how to use it. I

believe that she was shown a little bit but still we were stumbling through and we didn't really know what we were doing.'

'The Job Guide appeared at our place, and I had no idea what it was, and it was only that we had spoken to [the PACTS facilitator] and coming along here and we got to go through it and understand just how much of a bible that is.'

'I've learnt that [using the Job Guide to] research the details of what a job entails is really important. My son left school in year 9, if he had know what he would have to do as part of his apprenticeship he would have stayed at school.'

Starting early

Parents were very positive about being made explicitly aware of the different ways their children can access information about work and training in their field of interest *before* their children have to make a significant decision such as leaving school or choosing VCE subjects. Significantly, all the parents stated that PACTS would be most helpful if it were presented well before the students start VCE, ideally at the start of year 8.

'making it a family discussion [is important] if you start at year 8... it doesn't become a "you should do this" at year 10, "you've gotta decide now".'

Parents agreed that making PACTS available before VCE would reduce the disempowering stress where students feel pressured to conform to one pathway (high ENTER scores) or regard themselves as a failure. They explained that in their experience this situation can result in students feeling disengaged and hopeless about their study and their future because the one course of action that they were aware of (high ENTER scores) had become out of reach.

'[If a child doesn't know how to research their options and doesn't do well in VCE then] they are devastated because they don't know about the other options that are available to them.'

'Before the stress of doing the last two years of school, if they know that there is an alternate way to do it, it takes some of the pressure off.'

Family benefits

Parents felt their participation in the workshops had given their younger children a chance that their older ones had missed out on. PACTS has given parents the skills to respond to the different needs of their different children—an approach that is better than only having the experiences of the first 'guinea pig child' to fall back on when helping subsequent children.

Parents made the following comparisons between the decision making processes of elder children who made decisions about post-school options before their parents participated in PACTS and of the younger ones whose decision making process has been shaped by their parents' participation in PACTS.

'You flounder through the first one, you learn bits and pieces as you go along, and it's all unknown, and you don't find out enough, it's just not directed at you, and so we thought well the more we know the better armed we are for the other two.'

'My older daughter wanted to do a certain field, didn't get the ENTER score, well she got into uni but it wasn't the course she wanted, it was her second choice, so she deferred and she's never gone back which upset me. [S]o I felt that if I can get in a bit earlier with my son and at least I know a bit more than I did when she was going through I can help him ... it's been invaluable to me.'

'Suddenly she's thinking options, it would have been nice to have that with the first.'

'I had one in primary school looking at the career guide book of my eldest who is doing year 12, and the one in primary school is looking at it and suddenly she's thinking options ... she's leafing through it and going further, and thinking, "What [do] I do if I wanted to be this?". She's had a lot more exposure to knowledge, she's the most informed out of all four of them.'

'When you hit it the first time it's a frightening experience.'

'The experience of the first didn't help with the second or even the third, they all took different options.'

Overcoming feelings of isolation

Parents reported that meeting other parents, finding out that other parents wanted to ask 'silly questions', and that they were dealing with the same transition issues, was very helpful. PACTS also broke down feelings of isolation and helped to connect parents to the school community.

'I think that that is the best thing about these groups, you can talk to other parents and learn that there are other avenues.'

'On a personal note I was really house bound before ... [but now] my kids are seeing me getting more and more involved and doing things with people. Even sitting here talking now would have been a big issue [before I participated in the PACTS program].'

Essential extra support for parents

Parents explained that schools do not provide the level of support that they need. They appreciate PACTS because it recognises that parents need training in order to fulfil their important role in supporting their children's decision making process.

'Teachers don't have the information and don't offer any help to students or parents with these decisions.'

'One career teacher for the whole school isn't enough. They can't meet either the parents' or the students' needs.'

Feedback about PACTS programs that are run for students as well as for parents

Some of the parents had children who had been part of a trial at Mt Erin Secondary College, where the PACTS program had been delivered to both parents and children (separately). These parents were very positive about the benefits for their children and found it complemented their own participation in the PACTS program. Parents described their children as more empowered and more motivated as a result. Parents whose children were not at schools where PACTS is offered to students were keen to see their children gain access to this program.

Organising the program: parents' observations and experiences

Parents felt it was desirable for invitations need to be issued by personal phone call, since letters do not work.

Parents who had taken on a liaison role for PACTS also observed that it is necessary to have a supportive school and principal so that information about PACTS can be incorporated into the general information sessions run by the school. Sometimes a change in secondary school culture has to be encouraged because often parents only come onto school grounds when kids are in trouble. The parents involved in liaison also noted that to get a school 'on side' you often need to make it clear that PACTS involves no extra work for teachers.

What would parents like to see in future PACTS programs?

Parents at focus groups expressed support for the following suggestions for future programs:

- refresher workshops and workshops to help at particular decision making points in their children's progress, for example when choosing VCE subjects
- more workshops as part of the initial PACTS program
- as many handouts as possible at the workshops.

One parent suggested a 'buddy' system where parents ring each other to see how they are progressing at set time periods after the PACTS workshops.

8 Discussion and policy implications

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 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.

Our finding that only around 13% of parents feel that they know enough about post-school options to help their children with transition decision making, while almost 100% of parents report feeling that it is important to be involved, points to a significant deficiency in current support and information services for parents and strongly supports the assumptions underlying PACTS.

Indeed most parents feel that information is *not* readily available from a range of existing sources including schools. Despite this, around 70% of parents had already spoken to their children about post-school options, before taking part in the PACTS workshops. An important finding related to this is the strong positive relationship between parents' education level and the likelihood of having discussed post-school options, indicating that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, whose parents are likely to have lower education level, are likely to miss out on this crucial support without programs such as PACTS in place. This argument is supported by overseas research indicating that the provision of 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)

From the student perspective, parents were seen as an important resource, being the group that they had most commonly already talked to about transitions, ahead of teachers, friends, careers counsellors or other family members. In terms of who they would *like* to talk to, parents were second only to the careers counsellor. Moreover, many students had specific ideas about how they wanted their parents to help them. This involved becoming better informed and being supportive of their explorations of career options and talking to them about options, not being authoritarian or making the decisions for them.

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.

Other elements that were identified as important were providing a wide range of information, ongoing support and opportunities for parents to meet and share experiences. This last point had not been identified in research elsewhere. It also seems that starting work with parents once their

children are in years 11 or 12 is too late and that such programs should preferably begin in year 7 or 8.

Workshops or information sessions appear to be the most feasible means of providing support and are well liked by parents. However, the desire by over 90% of parents to have someone to discuss their child's options with individually should also be noted and be built into any strategy to support parents. A significant number of parents, just under 60%, also felt that receiving printed information by post would be useful. This may be a means of reaching groups that are unable or unwilling to attend group sessions.

The PACTS program covers all of the areas listed above, apart from providing the opportunity for parents to meet with someone individually, which is not possible with current funding levels. Interim results and other research strongly support the program model being used, and show that there is a significant gap in current transition services that the PACTS program is addressing. More information about the effectiveness of PACTS will be available when a follow up survey is carried out in the last quarter of 2005.

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