

A conversation that never stops

An indicative study of the Parents As Career Transitions Support program

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Parents play a significant role in supporting their children to make informed decisions in their career pathway planning. Traditionally, career counselling services for students have been geared to identifying an appropriate career destination and providing labour market information. As the world of work demands flexible work identities, narrow and linear forms of career advice are limited in supporting parents, who increasingly carry the burden of career-related support (Patton 2001). Their children are likely to face longer periods of time in transition from school to work than previous generations and to face multiple career decisions along the life course (FYA 2013). There is a need for appropriate pathways and transition supports for a changing world.

The Parents as Career Transition Support (PACTS) program provides parents with up-to-date information related to their children's transitions to post-compulsory education, training and work. Through group workshops, a trained facilitator discusses with parents how they can confidently support their children's career aspirations and preferences. PACTS seeks to build parents' knowledge of in-school and post-school pathway options. It also aims to build on information provision by offering tools to enhance parent-child engagement.

In 2013, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, in partnership with Melbourne Institute, ran a small-scale study based on analysis of surveys and interviews conducted with parents who had attended PACTS in Victoria, as well as input from a focus group of trained PACTS facilitators. This report outlines key findings of the study and its implications for a broader national study of PACTS in 2014.

Key points

- **PACTS participants report high levels of satisfaction with the quality of the program.** Data collected since 2010 indicates high levels of satisfaction, with over 90% of parent respondents indicating that they were pleased with the quality of the workshops they attended.
- **PACTS builds parent confidence to support their children's transition decisions.** PACTS breaks down parent misconceptions about linear and fixed 'careers'; career decision making as something that only occurs in Year 12; and parents' sole responsibility for making career decisions for their child.
- **PACTS helps parents to navigate complex post-school systems.** PACTS highlights the supports parents can access to guide their children through multiple pathways and post-school options. This can be especially important for parents of children with a disability. PACTS also provides practical tools for parents to engage with their children throughout this process.
- **While parents and PACTS facilitators viewed PACTS favourably, they identified areas for development.** These included program attendance and retention, PACTS training for youth-specific service providers, and integration between PACTS and schools.

Background

In 2003 the Brotherhood of St Laurence developed and implemented PACTS as a workshop program to assist parents to be more confident supporters of their children’s career-related decision making. Since then, the program has been taken up interstate and adapted to meet the diverse needs of parents. In particular, the not-for-profit community organisation Youth Connect modified PACTS as a train-the-trainer model and tailored PACTS to include parents of children with a disability and culturally and linguistically diverse groups.

The research

A profile of the PACTS participants in 2013

In 2013, 69 parents attended the full PACTS program delivered by Youth Connect in Victoria, and 59 of them completed a survey. The majority of PACTS participants surveyed were university-educated and 44% were employed in a professional occupation. Most also came from high-income families: the median household income of PACTS participants was between \$130,000 and \$150,000 (compared to the median household income of \$64,000 in the 2011 Census). On the other hand, 19% of parents indicated their household was receiving income support payments. The majority of PACTS participants were married and 73% were mothers.

Quality of the PACTS program (2010–2012)

Youth Connect has been collecting data from PACTS participants since 2010 using various surveys aimed at monitoring workshop effectiveness. More than 500 participants were asked about the quality of the workshop and the quality of youth transitions information. More than 90% of respondents indicated agreement or strong agreement with statements related to workshop quality.

Figure 1 (see Appendix) shows participant responses specific to the youth transitions information provided by PACTS facilitators. Again, more than 90% of respondents indicated agreement or strong agreement with statements related to youth transition information. The high percentage of positive responses provides strong evidence that, with rare exceptions, PACTS participants felt they were provided with sufficient resources and could apply the information learned to engage with their children on youth transition topics.

Quality of the PACTS program (2013)

Figure 2 (see Appendix) shows responses to questions about the overall quality of the PACTS program in 2013. Fewer than 3% of PACTS graduates in 2013 indicated disagreement or strong disagreement with any of the statements designed to measure workshop quality. This indicates high approval of the PACTS program and is consistent with the historical record. Other responses to the same survey indicate that the vast majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the program has taught them enough to confidently support their children in making transition decisions.

Building parent confidence

Many parents are anxious and apprehensive about making the 'wrong choice' for their children. Most respondents indicated that they felt overwhelmed with the amount of information that exists about youth transitions (57%) and that they did not know where to access information about this topic before attending PACTS (51%).

PACTS addresses these and other concerns by breaking down parent misconceptions about 'careers' (see Table 1).

Table 1 How PACTS allays parent concerns

Parent concern	PACTS key message
Child doesn't know what they want to do	Career paths are not linear with a fixed destination. This is emphasised through parent self-reflection and group sharing of own journeys.
Child is on the 'wrong track'	There are multiple tracks to multiple destinations, guided by accessible supports and opportunities.
Parent will make the wrong decision for their child	Career decision making is not a single event, but occurs throughout life and involves ongoing discussion between child and parent.

Challenging traditional notions of 'career'

When asked about their learning from the program, parents spoke of how the PACTS sessions broadened their understanding of careers:

The other thing [the facilitator] said which also stuck with me was ... that the conversation about careers never stops. It doesn't stop at 18; she's still having career discussions with her children in their

early and mid 20s. So the whole point of this PACTS thing was for us is to be able to walk alongside them and be advisers and listen to their career thoughts, not just up to the end of this year but beyond as well. (Parent)

The biggest thing that I got from [PACTS] was just to keep having those conversations and those discussions ... to keep talking to them about their options and what they can do and what they might like to do. (Parent)

Rather than heading for a single destination, career pathways unfold in multiple, extended ways. Therefore, the career guidance that parents need to provide for their children is ongoing. The following parent reflects on this process, noting how 'career' also relates to other aspects of life.

I think when parents hear the word 'career' they're back in to when they were younger and you chose a career path and you chose it for life. You didn't move around as much but what we really explored through PACTS and really struck a chord for myself ... is just thinking about careers more broadly than just the actual work that a child's going to do and how work can complement other aspects of life. Because it was the modified program [for parents of children with a disability], it also explored volunteer work, it explored how you might earn money to do things that you felt good about—maybe that's music, maybe that's art, maybe that's sport—but looking more holistically about post-school options using career as a definition. (Parent of child with a disability)

Enhancing career-related parent–child interactions

While many parents ask their child about their aspirations, PACTS helps parents to identify within these aspirations the aspects that inform suitable post-school pathways. As one PACTS facilitator explained, career guidance has moved on from simple information provision to a focus on the parent–child relationship:

[In] the old days in careers we were expected to just hand out information and then fill in your VTAC stuff [tertiary course preferences]. Now it's much more trying to empower these young people because they're going to have to make decisions right through their life ... it doesn't matter how much information they've got out there, it's how you use that.

Some parents appreciated the PACTS tools that helped them to unpack their child's aspirations and interests in order to clarify pathways:

He'd identified in class he wanted to be a builder, yet he'd shown no aptitude in building ... So what PACTS taught me was to unpack that 'I want to be a builder'. I ... kind of went 'Really? Where does that come from? What does that mean?' He'd never shown one bit of interest in anything like that, but I was able to have the conversations about what are the elements of a job that are important to [him]. I was able to unpack that with him and boil down the fact that that's really what he wanted. (Parent of child with a disability)

Having attended PACTS, this parent was able to clarify that her child preferred to work in a job that was outdoors.

Navigating complex post-school systems

Parents reported feeling daunted when confronted with multiple, unfamiliar post-school options. This was particularly the case for parents of children with a disability, as they move between education, employment and welfare services that are fragmented across state and federal government lines. Shifting funding conditions further compound their uncertainties. PACTS introduces them to the range and combination of services that they may be able to access.

While some parents used to feel that they must navigate their child's transitions on their own, PACTS enables them to sort through information to source relevant support:

Some of the things that I took away were to involve my son in discussions ... Whereas I guess that we had always thought that was more something we would do for him, but to try and involve him in that process. (Parent of child with a disability)

The same parent discussed how PACTS has enabled her to seek out new potential pathways for her child.

After PACTS I feel more comfortable that there are options available and there's a variety of supports available. And I guess through PACTS we found out about some of the transition programs that are available in the future for young adults. So he doesn't necessarily need to find a workplace

straight off, he could go to a service where they can help him to further develop his skills and look for employment further down the track. That was something that we weren't aware of, so we're just really finding information at the moment.

Opportunities for future development

While parents and PACTS facilitator viewed the program favourably, they identified areas where it could be strengthened.

Firstly, the retention of parents within the PACTS sessions requires examination. In 2013, 216 parents attended a two-session PACTS workshop held by Youth Connect. Of these, only 68 parents completed the workshop (i.e. attended both sessions). There may be reason to reconsider the delivery format so that more parents attend the full PACTS program.

Secondly, some PACTS facilitators and parents were surprised at the low attendance from parents in some schools. Reasons suggested for this included the lack of a clear and persuasive marketing strategy to parents that distinguishes PACTS' unique contribution from other VCE and information session material; the misconception that PACTS is just another information session; and possible disinterest from parents who approach their child's transition as consumers. PACTS facilitators suggested that some parents were simply interested in the outcome of career choice, rather than the mechanisms or skills needed in the decision making process. This consumer model is illustrated in the following analogy:

It's like plumber syndrome, I say to the plumber 'Fix my toilet'. I don't want to know how he fixes it, just 'I'll write the bill, you fix it you do it'. (PACTS facilitator)

Thirdly, PACTS facilitators noted that typical PACTS participants were parents who were highly engaged with their school community, and that parents who were less engaged with their schools might be missing out. To expand PACTS' reach to these groups, the facilitators proposed iterations of PACTS that could be delivered to youth workers, psychologists, health care professionals and community service providers. They believed this version of PACTS could address a perceived lack of awareness of career supports among family services providers who work with households experiencing disadvantage.

Fourthly, the integration of PACTS within schools could be enhanced by clearly distinguishing the different

purposes of parent-school engagement relating to their child's career, and more consistent and ongoing guidance from the school and PACTS.

Integration of PACTS into the school setting is critical, given that it helps to develop trust from parents and enhances access to the program. The ability of PACTS to deliver an effective service to a range of parents is largely dependent upon the level of cohesion between school communities, families and community organisations. PACTS is currently delivered in a broader educational system that does not provide consistent career guidance or transition support. In one example of a lack of integration, a parent reported receiving contradictory advice from PACTS and the school career counsellor over the suitability of a VET course compared with an apprenticeship. The parent ended up frustrated at a perceived bias towards VCE completion and university above other post-school options.

Within secondary school, post-school options are largely discussed in the context of VCE completion and subject selection. Distinguishing PACTS as separate from yet connected to this focus could more clearly define the place of PACTS in the confusing array of supports available. Career support that includes talking about parent-child interactions complements rather than duplicates existing school-led information sessions.

Limitations

This modest study relied on data collected from parents who had relatively high levels of economic and social resources. While there were 14 PACTS survey respondents who had children with a disability, there was limited data available from families of more diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

We know little from the minority of PACTS participants that were not satisfied with the program. Similarly, we do not know about parents who received invitations to PACTS but chose not to attend or the 148 who did not attend the entire program. To what extent are the needs of parents who do not attend PACTS being met? And could they benefit from PACTS participation?

Next steps

Overall, the research findings affirm the value of pathways and transition support programs such as PACTS. The program appears to provide parents with the tools to better engage and guide their children

through their post-schooling years. However, more work is needed to determine the robustness of our findings—particularly the model's impact on families experiencing disadvantage.

In 2014, PACTS is being rolled out nationally, targeting areas of disadvantage. The Brotherhood of St Laurence and Melbourne Institute will continue to study PACTS during this stage, with a key interest in how PACTS serves the needs of a larger and more diverse range of families. Investigating the suitability and reach of PACTS in more regions experiencing disadvantage is required in order to formulate recommendations and policy implications, and this will be achieved by the next stage of evaluation.

References

Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) 2013, *How young people are faring 2013*, Foundation for Young Australians, Melbourne.

Patton, W 2001, 'Career education: what we know, what we need to know', *Australian Journal of Career Development*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 13–19.

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Further reading

Previous reports on the PACTS program can be downloaded from the Brotherhood of St Laurence website:

[*A positive influence: equipping parents to support young people's career transitions*](#) (PDF file, 179 KB) by Lois Bedson and Daniel Perkins (2006)

[*Supporting young people's career transition choices: the role of parents: interim evaluation*](#) (PDF file, 128 KB) by Daniel Perkins and Carol Peterson (2005)

For other relevant Brotherhood publications see www.bsl.org.au/Publications.

For more information about the study contact:

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Appendix

Figure 1 Parents' rating of the quality of youth transitions information provided by PACTS facilitators (multiple surveys 2010–2012)

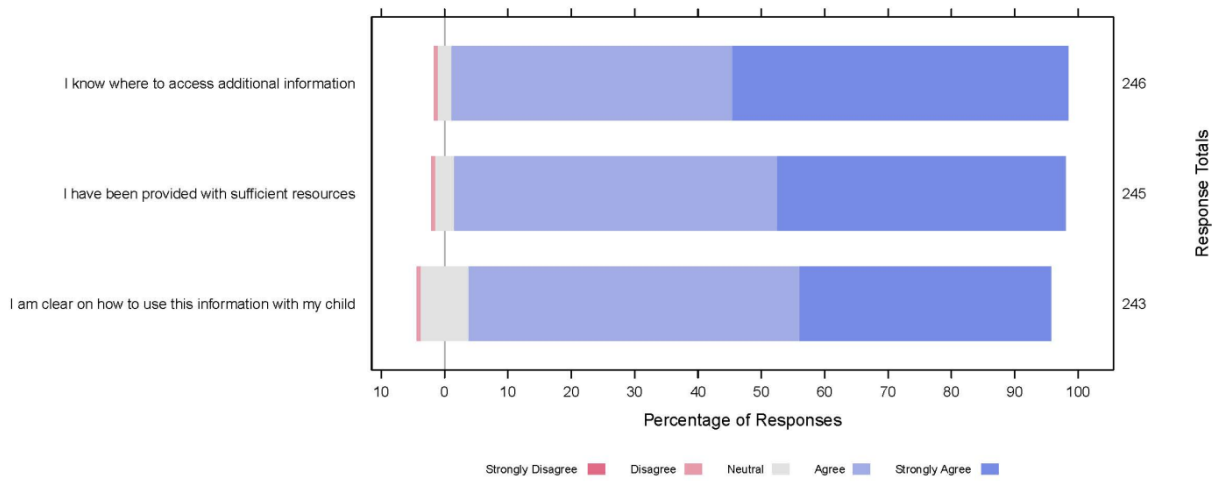


Figure 2 Parents' rating of the overall quality of the PACTS Program (2013)

