



# **B R A V E**

## **Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) Program**

**2021-22 Pre-Budget Submission**



## Letter from the CEO

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It is beyond rewarding to be leading the organisation I looked for but could not find as a 16-year-old mother over 20 years ago.

Our Board, partners, supporters, and incredible staff believe in the boundless potential of all young people, and particularly the extraordinary teenage parents who are working hard to create opportunities for themselves and their children.

In 2015-17, Brave led the creation of Australia's first national strategy for helping teen parents to re-engage with education. We drew on expertise from across many sectors and, most importantly, the experiences of teen parents themselves. This led to our organisation being engaged by the Department of Social Services to develop the Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) program, and the subsequent invitation to apply for a direct, non-competitive Try, Test and Learn grant of \$4 million to trial the program across Australia.

We know that teen parents have high hopes and aspirations for the future, but they need help creating a roadmap to get there. They want to complete their schooling, undertake further training or study and secure good jobs. They want to be positive role models for their children and give them the best possible chances in life. We also know that, until this trial, it has been difficult for these young people to navigate their way back onto the path and to access the programs that will serve them in their journeys towards breaking the cycle of long-term welfare dependency. The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the already vulnerable mental wellbeing of teen parents has only added further barriers.

The SEPT program and our amazing team of skilled mentors are the glue that connects each young parent to the village of support that already exists in their own communities. Based on the internal data we have been collecting and an evaluation by the Peter Underwood Centre, SEPT has the potential to deliver strong economic and social benefits over the long term.

Brave is empowering those most at risk of long-term disadvantage through this innovative early intervention program. Together, we are guiding these brave young parents onto positive pathways we trust will lead them into the healthy, fulfilling, and independent lives they all deserve. SEPT aligns closely with key priorities of the Australian Government including workforce preparation, mental health, and women's empowerment and leadership.

The funding for the SEPT trial is due to end in March this year and there is no provision in the Try, Test and Learn Fund for continued funding. SEPT is therefore unfunded from March 2021 and in the coming years. It is therefore urgent that ongoing funding be considered for inclusion in the 2021-22 Budget.

On behalf of Brave Foundation, I therefore thank the Australian Government for the opportunity to submit the 'Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens' (SEPT) program for consideration in the pre-Budget process.



**Bernadette Black, OM**

**CEO and Founding Director, Brave Foundation**



# Contents

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- About Brave Foundation ..... 2**
- Recommendations 1 & 2 ..... 2**
- The issue ..... 2**
- About the Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens program ..... 3**
- How SEPT helps ..... 5**
- The evidence for SEPT ..... 5**
- Why funding is needed now ..... 6**
- What the funding will deliver ..... 7**
- Budget..... 9**

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## About Brave Foundation

Brave Foundation is a charity dedicated to mentoring and supporting young expecting and parenting Australians. Established in 2008, our focus is supporting the mental and general health, wellbeing, education, workforce participation, and parenting and general life skills of the young people we serve. We do this by providing information, advice, mentoring, and referrals and connections to existing services in their community.

Brave also seeks to improve the quality and availability of services provided to young parents by supporting the development of public policy and positively influencing community attitudes towards expecting and parenting teens through advocacy, partnerships and political engagement.

Brave's governing body is our diverse 9-member Board comprising experienced professionals from across Australia and led by Chair Prof. Maria Harries AO. Founding Director and CEO Bernadette Black – once a 16-year-old mother herself – has over 20 years' experience in social services advocacy and policy design and oversees all Brave's operations.

Brave's robust governance and management are key to providing a targeted and responsive service, especially given the vulnerability of the young people that form our client cohort. The privacy, safety, and comfort of our participants is a high priority. Robust privacy and consent policies are adhered to. Relevant staff must hold valid Working with Vulnerable People cards, as well as undergo police checks, prior to working with participants. Staff also complete professional development courses to build skills around inclusion and cultural sensitivity. All staff, regardless of role, complete family violence training, with further training for mentors being implemented in the areas of child protection, sexual assault referrals, self-care, professional boundaries, and working with people experiencing trauma.

## Recommendations 1 & 2

Establish funding in the 2021-22 Budget to:

**1. Support continuation of Brave Foundation's SEPT program in the existing 11 sites in Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and the Northern Territory**

*and*

**2. Allow for the expansion of SEPT into South Australia, Western Australia, and the ACT over the next 2 years**

## The issue

In 2018, almost 7,000 births were recorded to Australian mothers aged between 15-19 years<sup>1</sup>.

A 2017 report by the Australian Human Rights Commission into Children's Rights<sup>2</sup> highlighted that young mothers face major barriers to completing their education and therefore have lower levels of educational attainment than

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Australia's children (2020).

<sup>2</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission. Children's Rights Report (2017).





their peers. This results in lower levels of labour market participation, lower paying jobs and, in many cases, welfare dependency.

The report found, 'Young mothers tend to be the most socio-economically disadvantaged of all mothers. This is associated with poor educational qualifications, pre-existing socio-economic circumstances, and the impact of raising children as young mothers.'

A 2013 study<sup>3</sup> found that 'teenage mothers are three times more likely to get postnatal depression than older mothers and are at increased risk of poorer mental health for up to three years postpartum.' The same study highlighted:

- the stigma experienced by teenage mothers;
- their lack of support networks;
- the lack of relevant and appropriate information targeted at teenage mothers; and
- the need for tailored services and innovative methods of delivery.

A study conducted for the Department of Social Services (DSS) in 2017<sup>4</sup> indicated that 79% of mothers who have their first child before the age of 20 will rely on long-term unemployment benefits.

Importantly, the children of young parents are also at high risk. They are at higher risk of not meeting key developmental milestones. They are more likely to experience poorer health and other outcomes than most of their contemporaries. Children of welfare recipients are also more likely to end up on welfare payments themselves. Intergenerational welfare dependency is costly, devastating for individuals and their families, and has significant negative impacts on communities.

## About the Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens program

The Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) program implemented by the Brave Foundation directly addresses these issues in a practical and evidence-based way.

The trial of the SEPT program has been funded under the first tranche of the DSS Try, Test and Learn (TTL) Fund which identified young parents as a priority cohort requiring new and innovative solutions to welfare dependence. Through the trial, Brave has delivered the SEPT program through 11 sites in Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, and the Northern Territory since May 2018.

SEPT enhances and complements existing health, wellbeing, education, and workforce participation initiatives provided by federal, state and non-government organisations by providing mentoring, information and resources, assisting participants to navigate the complex landscape of service providers, ensuring they access the services that are right for them, and supporting and guiding them through their various challenges to complete support programs.

We know mainstream services can have difficulty adapting large-scale programs to meet the specific needs of expecting and parenting teens facing complex situations. The SEPT program is flexible enough to be adapted to the needs of each participant and through our trial we have observed that applying a tailored approach has helped our participants to achieve their goals more effectively.

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<sup>3</sup> Boath EH, Henshaw C, Bradley E. Meeting the challenges of teenage mothers with postpartum depression: overcoming stigma through support. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology* 31, no. 4 (2013): 352-369.

<sup>4</sup> Cobb-Clark DA, Dahmann SC, Salamanca N, Zhu A. Intergenerational disadvantage: learning about equal opportunity from social assistance receipt. (2017).



The heart of the SEPT program is the network of trained and qualified mentors based at community hubs who provide early intervention assistance and work with program participants to help them identify their own goals and develop strategies to achieve them. These are set out in individual Pathway Plans that focus on goals in the areas of peri and post-natal mental health and wellbeing, education and workforce participation, goal setting and career advice, navigating financial and housing assistance, and help with parenting and everyday life skills. The Pathway Plan is informed by the DSS-Supported First 1,000 Days framework<sup>5</sup> to ensure support is coordinated, comprehensive, and culturally informed.

Once paired with their mentor, participants have, on average, 24 tailored meetings. The program is voluntary and personalised to each participant and considers the context of the local community and the participant's individual circumstances to ensure delivery is inclusive, safe, and accessible. By ensuring a supportive relationship is established early, and that connections are made to appropriate support services, mentors ensure these young people are accessing the resources they need to improve their mental health, continue their education and training, increase their ability to participate in the workforce, build their economic security, create happy, healthy, and skilled families, and stop the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage and poverty.



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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-programs-services-children-protecting-australias-children/the-first-1000-days>

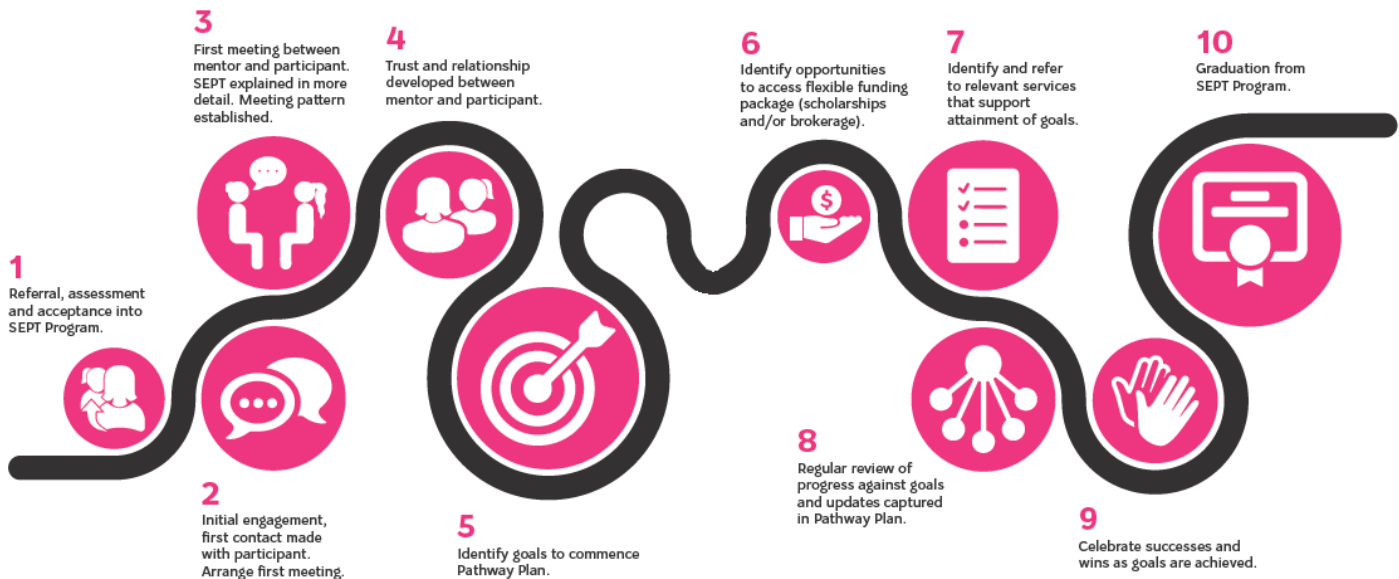


## How SEPT helps

Under the program, the Pathway Plan guides participants along an interactive and flexible mentoring program designed to help them pursue their goals – and connect to opportunities and support services – in the areas of workforce readiness and training, parenting support, health and wellbeing, financial and other life skills, and educational prospects within their local communities. The aim is ultimately to enable them to pursue fulfilling careers, independent of reliance on long-term welfare.

SEPT facilitates effective and timely referrals ensuring that young parents are rapidly connected with relevant interventions and services, providing them with a secure base of met basic needs which they can build upon.

The figure below shows the journey of a SEPT participant:



## The evidence for SEPT

At a program cost of approximately \$10,000 per participant, SEPT represents exceptional value for money. It is an efficient way of delivering a much-needed service that yields long-term benefits, including intergenerational impacts. We believe that SEPT generates savings to government that more than compensate for the investment through breaking the cycle of welfare dependency, through addressing mental health and general wellbeing issues, and by supporting children through the vital first 1,000 days.

Through the trial, SEPT has already achieved great success – assisting over 400 expecting and parenting teens and facilitating 1,344 inbound and outbound referrals to and from local community organisations.



A recent study by the Peter Underwood Centre of Tasmania found that 65% of SEPT program participants have met at least one of their goals in the areas of health, wellbeing and parenting, education and workforce participation, and financial security. In addition, internal data showed:

- 26% of participants accessed a mental health support service;
- 60% reported an increase in confidence and wellbeing;
- 37% were engaged in job skills training or workforce preparation.

During the trial, Brave worked with numerous community organisations such as Shine Women, Got Your Back Sista and FAST (Families and Schools Together) to deliver a range of initiatives focusing on healthy relationships, safety online, nutrition, wellbeing, and building confidence and self-esteem. In our Directory of Services and among our referral partners, there are currently 127 mental health/counselling organisations including community organisations and state and national organisations.

The evaluation of the program has also highlighted our success in working collaboratively with communities, elevating and referring to services that already exist. Through our program, participants engaged with (on average) three other community organisations with which they otherwise would not have connected.

The SEPT program has rigorous data collection through our client management system that permits follow-up with participants, ongoing evaluation of program outcomes and measurement against key performance indicators. The client management system records:

- Demographic details (age, geographic location, cultural background, and information on disabilities, domestic violence risks, and mental health impacts);
- All interactions with, and details of support offered to, participants, including referrals to other organisations;
- Details of the participant's Pathway Plan, including steps being taken to achieve the identified goals;
- Regular assessment tools, such as SCORE and K10, to track the mental health and wellbeing of our participants; and,
- Achievement of identified goals, including workforce readiness and participation.

## Why funding is needed now

SEPT has been funded for two years under the DSS TTL fund. That funding is due to terminate in March 2021. SEPT is unfunded for the 2021-22 financial year and beyond.

SEPT has proven its effectiveness and its value for money through the trial. It has also successfully established partnerships with key federal, state and local organisations and it has built trust in the community. SEPT is a trusted 'brand'.

As described above, SEPT aligns closely with key government priorities. It is therefore vital that funding be provided for in the Budget for the continuation of SEPT and its expansion into the remaining states and territories. It would be a tremendous loss of expertise, experience, effort and goodwill if SEPT was not funded to continue.





## What the funding will deliver

If our recommendations are accepted and ongoing funding for the SEPT program is delivered in the Budget, Brave Foundation will:

1. Continue to deliver SEPT through the existing 11 sites in Tasmania, the Northern Territory, Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales; and
2. Expand the program to deliver SEPT in South Australia, Western Australia and the ACT after identifying suitable community sites there in line with our established criteria.

In addition, as the program moves from the trial phase to a permanent phase, we will introduce important innovations to program delivery.

- **Establish a National Reference Group**

During its design phase, SEPT engaged young parents directly and facilitated a co-design process to ensure the program was accessible and informed by lived experience, we used the trial to make refinements to ensure the program meets the diverse backgrounds and evolving needs of participants.

Brave strongly believes that the SEPT model has now been implemented and thoroughly tested, and in several diverse communities. Brave believes that SEPT is effective, efficient, and is what is needed to help vulnerable young parents on a pathway to independence and will ensure that their children have the best possible start in life. Brave also considers that the model has been well-embedded in each of the communities where it has been trialled and has become an essential part of the service architecture.

As SEPT moves from the trial phase and expands nationally, increases the number of participants, and connects with a greater number of partners and services, it will be important to draw upon a wider range of expertise and advice. We propose to establish a National Reference Group that would include federal, state and local government representatives, young parents, community providers, and academics who will advise and monitor the rollout and ongoing evaluation of the program.

By continuously reviewing and refining our program offering through the prism of lived experience and co-design, as well as examining the outcomes as they occur, we can ensure our program is best placed to meet the changing needs of our participants in a post COVID-19 environment.

- **Adapt the SEPT program to respond to the impact of COVID-19**

The full impact of COVID-19 on young people generally, and on young parents in particular, are not yet known. However, the direct experience of our SEPT mentors throughout 2020 and into 2021 has shown that the vulnerability of expecting and parenting teens to social isolation, mental health issues and disengagement from education, training and employment have only become more pressing as a result of the pandemic. A priority for the SEPT program for at least the next few years will be to respond to these emerging needs and to complement federal and state initiatives by connecting participants with services and programs that respond to the economic, social and health impacts of the pandemic.



- **Further develop SEPT to complement government priorities**

Alignment with government priorities and programs in areas including education and training, workforce participation, mental health and wellbeing has already been a feature of SEPT through the trial period.

We strongly support recent government initiatives such as the JobMaker Plan announced in the 2020-21 Budget, the 2020 Women's Economic Security Statement, the Women's Leadership and Development Program, and the Perinatal Mental Health and Wellbeing Program.

A priority for SEPT going forward will be to complement these initiatives, including by establishing connections and referral pathways to programs and services supported under these priorities.

- **Provide enhanced and targeted support to young people most at risk of disadvantage**

In addition to the barriers that becoming a parent at a young age can create, there are other factors that place them in multiple categories of risk of disadvantage and lower-than-average workforce participation rates. These include identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI), coming from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background, living in a remote or regional location, or experiencing domestic or family violence.

These difficulties mean these young parents often remain disconnected, lacking the resources, social skills or confidence to engage available support services. Further barriers such as insecure housing and lack of access to transport means it is vital young parents have additional support in order to access mental health, education, employment and other services.

During the trial of the SEPT program, one in ten SEPT participants was from a (CALD) background. Brave is committed to respecting diversity and providing an inclusive and safe space for every participant, staff member, and community partner. We provide professional development to all staff around cultural and Indigenous awareness, we select partners that reflect the diversity of their local communities, and we encourage participants to freely identify their cultural, sexual and gender identity.

Moving forward, we are committed to the ongoing development of our Model of Mentoring – an interactive tool that includes links to resources to support CALD, ATSI and LGBTQIA+ participants, those experiencing isolation, and those with additional physical considerations.

We also plan to expand our current program format to include two full-time digital mentors dedicated to assisting participants in rural or remote areas.



## Budget

The following proposed budget is based on our experience of the costs of the SEPT program during the two-year trial funded under the DSS TTL Fund as well our estimates of additional funding required for the expansion of the program as described in the preceding sections.

A full operational budget can be provided upon request.

	<i>2021 - 2022 Year</i>	<i>2022-2023 Year</i>	<i>2023-2024 Year</i>	<i>Total 3 Year Budget</i>
Program Costs	\$1,500,00	\$1,500,00	\$1,500,00	\$4,500,000
Administration Costs	\$410,000	\$410,000	\$410,000	\$1,230,000
<b>Yearly total</b>	<b>\$1,910,000</b>	<b>\$1,910,000</b>	<b>\$1,910,000</b>	<b>\$5,730,000</b>