

Single parents need more support in search for jobs, says new research

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Despite wanting to work, single parents on Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA) are not getting the support and training they need to gain quality employment, according to major new research by the Single Parent Action Network (SPAN) and UWE Bristol. The report's Bristol launch will take place at UWE on 21 June 2012.

The research was funded by the Big Lottery Research Program followed 50 single parents in Bristol for three years after their move from Income Support to JSA.

It reveals that of the single parents who gained employment during that time, none found work through their local Jobcentre, but through

existing networks such as friends and previous employers. In addition, all, except those who went into self-employment, took on low paid [jobs](#) with few prospects, where their previous qualifications and skills were not likely to be used.

The research findings come as an estimated additional 124,000 single parents are set to enter the job market. Since May, in order to continue receiving benefits single parents must be available for work once their children reach the age of five – an age limit which has been gradually reduced from 12 in 2008, to 10 in 2009 and seven in 2010.

The research found that returning to work boosted the health, well-being and optimism of most parents, as well as improving family life through additional income. “I feel I’ve joined the human race, I can hold my head up,” commented one parent. However, many were disappointed by the lack of training available to them. In particular, they were not eligible to receive self-employment support until they had been on JSA for six months, even though self-employment offers a flexible and often fulfilling option for many single parents.

Further findings include:

- A lack of suitable childcare was a barrier in returning to work, especially finding care for secondary age children. For many parents, ensuring that their children attended school and did not get into trouble was seen as a crucial responsibility. This was a particular concern for mothers of teenage boys.
- Single parents in the research did not find Jobcentre Plus (JCP) helpful in enabling them to balance their parental responsibilities with the need to work. Some felt that JCP staff simply wanted them to go for any job irrespective of their qualifications or the best interests of their children. They also missed the specialist point of contact which Lone • Parent

Advisors provided when they claimed Income Support. Single parents reported seeing a different JCP advisor on every visit, which meant that their job search lacked continuity.

- Suitable part-time jobs were difficult to find as a result of the recent recession, with increasing competition across the whole job market. It was felt that JCP staff could do more to liaise with employers, including encouraging them to consider flexible hours or offer job-shares.

“Although single parents welcome the opportunity to work, they face a number of significant hurdles in returning to employment, as our research shows, with implications for women's equality given that 9 out of 10 single parents are mothers,” said Sue Cohen, Chief Executive, [Single Parent](#) Action Network. “Times may be hard, but there are many straightforward and practical steps that the government could take to support single parents as workers and carers.

“These include providing Lone Parent Advisors for single parents on JSA and improved training for Jobcentre staff. There needs to be better service delivery in supporting skills, training, childcare and children's well-being. More should be done to support those innovative parents who want to start their own business, while employers should be encouraged to design quality jobs with part-time hours.”

The research interviews were mainly carried out by a group of single parents who were trained and supported throughout the study. Commenting on this initiative, Professor Debra Salmon, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, UWE Bristol, said, “At UWE Bristol, we were delighted to work with single parents from local communities, providing them with the skills to become peer researchers. The training and academic accreditation that they received improved their self-esteem, confidence and – arguably – their employability. This innovative approach means that single [parents](#) themselves are influencing future

policy and practice. It also supports UWE Bristol's ongoing commitment to public and community engagement and widening participation.”

Provided by University of the West of England

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