

FINDING AND USING PROGRAMS THAT WORK FOR YOU

A Resource for Parents written by Family Inclusion Strategies Hunter Peer Parent Expert

Why programs are pushed so hard

When child protection is involved, parents are often told to attend programs, courses, or workshops. These are usually framed as “support,” but parents report they are also used as **evidence**.

That doesn’t mean programs are always bad, but it *does* mean you deserve to choose programs that:

- actually help you
- don’t overwhelm or retraumatise you
- fit your life, your culture, and your capacity

You are not failing if a program doesn’t work for you.

A program that doesn’t fit can do harm.

Step 1: Get clear on *why* the program is being suggested

Before you agree to anything, ask (or get your advocate to ask):

- What concern is this program meant to address? (your SOPP will have what DCJ want you to do, you know if there are things you want to work on.)
- Is this required, or being recommended?
- How will attendance be used or reported?
- Who receives the attendance report, and what will it say?

You have a right to understand how a program connects to your child protection involvement— not just be sent to one.

Step 2: Decide what you need support with

Not every program is relevant to every parent.

Ask yourself:

- Do I need practical skills, emotional support, information, or advocacy?
- Am I dealing with trauma, grief, exhaustion, or fear right now?
- Can I realistically attend this while coping with everything else?

It is okay to say:

"I'm open to support, but I need something that works with where I'm at."

Step 3: Know the different types of programs

Programs can look very different. Knowing the type helps you choose wisely.

Some common types include:

- Parenting programs (skills, routines, child development)
- Domestic and family violence programs
- Trauma-informed or healing programs
- Empowerment or confidence-building programs
- Peer-led or lived-experience programs

Not all programs are designed for parents who have had their children removed.

Not all programs are safe for parents who have experienced system harm.

Step 4: Ask practical questions *before* you start

Before enrolling, try to find out:

- Is this group-based or one-to-one?
- Are children present? (this can be triggering if your child has been removed)

- How long is it, and how often?
- Is attendance recorded? Is there a written report?
- Can I access the program at my own pace?
- Is transport, childcare, or online access available?

If the program can't work around your reality, it may not be the right fit.

Step 5: Don't overload yourself

Parents are often encouraged to do *too much at once*.

Doing multiple programs at the same time can:

- increase stress
- worsen trauma symptoms
- set you up to disengage or "fail"

It's okay to say:

"I want to do this properly, one step at a time."

Quality matters more than quantity.

Step 6: Use programs *strategically*

Some parents choose programs for support. Some choose them to meet system expectations. Many do both.

If you attend:

- keep your own notes
- ask for copies of attendance records
- correct anything that feels inaccurate
- write a reflection on how this program has supported you afterwards

Step 7: If a program feels harmful, you can stop

If a program:

- makes you feel unsafe or judged
- ignores your trauma or culture
- treats you as a problem to fix
- worsens your mental health

You are allowed to pause, change, or withdraw. Support should not come at the cost of your dignity. If you do stop, it is best to let caseworkers and the people running the program know. This way it won't be used against you.

Step 8: Programs can help you build a circle of support

While many programs are focused on "requirements," they can also be one of the few places where parents meet **other people who truly understand** what they're going through.

For some parents, programs become:

- a place to connect with other parents who get it
- a break from isolation
- a starting point for friendships or mutual support
- a way to rebuild confidence in speaking, sharing, and being seen

You don't have to share everything. You don't have to trust everyone.

Even one safe connection can make a difference.

Some parents find it helpful to:

- stay back after sessions to talk with others
- swap contact details with one trusted person
- ask facilitators about peer or community groups
- look for programs that are peer-led or strengths-based

Support doesn't always come from professionals. Often, it grows from sitting beside someone who understands what you are going through.

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