



Family Relationship Services
A U S T R A L I A

Response to the Australian Government's Discussion Paper: *Australia's Children: Safe and Well*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

National leadership, local initiative – turning the curve on child safety and wellbeing

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Linking services, supporting relationships.

PO Box 326 Deakin West ACT 2600
2/22 Napier Close Deakin ACT 2600
T 02 6162 1811 F 02 6162 1794
E admin@frsa.org.au ABN 38 124 321 080

www.frsa.org.au

Family Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) is the national peak body for family relationship services. For more information visit our website www.frsa.org.au or contact us:

PO Box 326

Deakin West, ACT 2600

Ph: 02 6162 1811

Fax: 02 6162 1794

admin@frsa.org.au

Executive Summary

Family Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) welcomes the Australian Government's commitment to the development of a National Child Protection Framework.

The time for national leadership has come. The development of the national framework offers a rare opportunity to develop a shared vision for achieving sustained improvements in safety and wellbeing for Australia's children. Underpinning this, there is a need for national targets, shared language, common outcome measures and the capacity to identify strategies that work.

While national leadership is important, it is local initiative that will make a difference in the day-to-day lives of children. Real change in wellbeing and safety occurs at the local level through the quality of relationships between family members, neighbours, peer groups, and community, health and education services.

Communities across Australia are diverse, one-size-fits-all approaches are unlikely to be successful. Each community has a unique mix of strengths and challenges. To 'turn the curve' to enhance child wellbeing and reduce the rate of abuse and neglect, effective local strategies will be needed.

Local strategies most likely to be effective are those that reduce social isolation, wrap supports around children, parents and families and increase the capacity of services to identify children at risk and respond appropriately.

The importance of community organisations that work with families and children cannot be overstated. They have a deep commitment to the wellbeing and safety of children, they also know their communities very well – the strengths, the vulnerabilities, the challenges to be overcome. They can mobilise substantial community resources and leverage existing infrastructure to implement strategies quickly and efficiently.

Community organisations are important partners in the development of the National Child Protection Framework from conceptualisation through to implementation.

Family relationship services are community organisations at the forefront of child safety and wellbeing. They have been working in partnership with the Australian Government to provide quality support to Australian families since the 1960's.

Family relationship services work with individuals and families across the life cycle, particularly at the transition points that create 'teachable moments' (e.g. the breakdown of existing relationships or the formation of new ones) and in response to the 'episodic events' that can impact on the safety and wellbeing of children.

As the national peak body for family relationship services FRSA has drawn on the expertise of member organisations to inform our response to the Discussion Paper: *Australia's Children: Safe and Well*. We support many of the options identified in the paper, we have also identified other areas in which action is needed.

Of particular note is the need to recognise the role of family courts and family law in child protection and include strategies in the national framework to enhance collaboration between court systems, statutory systems and community services when children are at risk. A summary of our recommendations is provided below. FRSA looks forward to continuing to work with the Australian and state/Territory Governments as the National Framework takes shape.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Use the development of the National Framework to establish a shared vision for turning the curve on child safety and wellbeing, encompassing the development of shared language, consistent definitions and outcome measures.

Recommendation 2: Harness local initiative by engaging with community organisations as important partners in the development of the National Child Protection Framework from conceptualisation through to implementation.

Recommendation 3: Build on existing infrastructure to expand the reach of family relationship education and increase capacity for early intervention through more intensive programs 'in the field' such as schools, workplaces and in the community.

Recommendation 4: Recognise the value of local initiatives that build community connections and reduce social isolation in the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

Recommendation 5: Invest in early intervention programs offering intensive and sustained support to families at risk using predictive indicators, before abuse occurs.

Recommendation 6: Engage the broader community in reducing and responding to child abuse and neglect through a national community education campaign.

Recommendation 7: Enhance the wellbeing of children by improving the capacity of governments and community service providers across a broad range of sectors (e.g. public housing, health and education) to accommodate and respond to complex family structures and shared parental care arrangements.

Recommendation 8: Include as an objective for the National Child Protection Framework, the reduction of children's and young people's exposure to high and sustained parental conflict in intact as well as separated families.

Recommendation 9: Recognise the significant role of family courts in identifying and responding to children at risk of abuse and neglect and include strategies to enhance this role through case management and collaborative processes, building on the achievements of the Magellan Project.

Recommendation 10: For children in family law matters consider the development of a single court process to handle child abuse and / or family violence matters to reduce the risk that children fall through the gaps of the two systems.

Recommendation 11: Enhance the capacity of family relationship services to work with grandparents and extended family networks through targeted communication strategies and the development of more inclusive models such as family group conferencing.

Recommendation 12: Undertake a national review of child abduction, violence and homicide post separation and related research projects to better identify those at risk and take appropriate action.

Recommendation 13: Increase the community based entry points to child wellbeing and protective services to encourage community engagement.

Recommendation 14: Include in the National Framework, the development of properly resourced, sustainable partnership models of integrated service delivery.

Recommendation 15: The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child to be adopted into domestic law through national 'Child Safety and Wellbeing' legislation.

Recommendation 16: Establish a national system for monitoring child wellbeing and child safety through a set of agreed indicators that include:

- 1) Measures of wellbeing across the domains of health, education and welfare
- 2) Measures of abuse, neglect and risk that are consistent across jurisdictions; and
- 3) Collated statistics on serious injuries and death caused by family violence and homicide.

Recommendation 17: For children and young people in out-of-home care, encourage meaningful relationships with parents and other relatives including use of Children's Contact Services to facilitate contact and provide other relationship supports.

Recommendation 18: Explore the potential application of Child Inclusive Practice in child protection and out-of-home care decision-making processes.

Recommendation 19: Strengthen the capacity of Australian and State/Territory funded programs to respond to the needs of grandparents through:

- 1) A national advice service for grandparents and service providers;
- 2) Resources for training staff and improving service responsiveness; and
- 3) Practical assistance for grandparent carers including financial support, access to regular breaks from full time care and help at home.

Recommendation 20: Resource a national project to enhance the capacity of family relationship services to respond to Indigenous children, families and communities -encompassing the development of appropriate models of service delivery, flexible performance measures and training for Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers.

Recommendation 21: Increase funding to community organisations delivering programs to children and families to improve salary rates and conditions commensurate with the public and private sector.

Recommendation 22: Support the development of a workforce strategy for the family relationship services sector that includes, among other things, investment in tertiary scholarships and vocational training to increase the supply of qualified practitioners to the sector.

Recommendation 23: Adjust funding models to recognise the higher costs associated with the delivery of services in regional, rural and remote areas with capacity for services to receive funding adjustments in response to local cost pressures when appropriate.

Recommendation 24: Invest in a broader range of conditions, inducements and benefits to attract and retain skilled Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff in isolated communities.

Recommendation 25: Include in the National Framework a national system for screening staff and volunteers working with children and families.