*Family and Relationship Services:*
*Valued now and into the future*

# Peer reviewed papers from the FRSA 2024 National Conference

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**Family and Relationship Services:** Valued now and into the future

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# Introduction

It gives me great pleasure to launch the FRSA National Conference 2024 e-Journal. This e-Journal showcases a breadth of practice wisdom, research evidence and insights that reflect our sector's value and our sector's potential. The result is an exciting collection of papers that I trust will provoke thought and inspire action across the sector and more broadly.

This year we were excited to introduce a second style of paper to the e-Journal – Practice Insights. Practice Insights papers are shorter in length than our e-Journal articles and provide an opportunity to share practice insights and early evidence or a conceptual proposal that is relevant, well thought out and accessible for an audience of informed practitioners and/or policy makers.

We have 7 papers in this edition – 3 Articles and 4 Practice Insights papers – covering diverse topics that speak to particular cohorts at different stages through the lifecourse. The papers sit across the following conference themes: Children at the Centre, the Schooling Years, Across the Lifecourse, Family violence, and Relationship breakdown and Re-partnering. We invited all our concurrent session and symposium presenters to consider submitting a paper to the e-Journal.

The Conference provides a space to share practice and research learnings. The e-Journal is designed to provide Conference presenters with an opportunity to deliver their Conference paper in a written format. This extension does require time and dedication from the authors and from those involved in the peer review process – with all e-Journal papers going through two rounds of peer review and an editing process. My sincere thanks to all involved and congratulations to all of our authors on the acceptance of theirs papers – articles and practice insights – for publication in the FRSA Conference e-Journal 2024.

I encourage all readers to share the Conference e-Journal with your colleagues and peers in the spirit of shared learning that is so integral to the culture of the FRSA national network.

With kind regards,



Jackie Brady

FRSA Executive Director

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PRACTICE INSIGHTS

# Enhancing Rural Youth Wellbeing with Move Your Emotions!

## The impact of sport and wellbeing for young people in regional and rural communities

**Naomi Simmons**, Team Leader Family Rural Resilience Program, Centacare New England North West (NENW)

## Introduction

In today's society, the importance of maintaining a fit and active lifestyle for our overall wellbeing is widely acknowledged, "In a wide perspective, a healthy life implies a harmony between mind, body, thoughts and feelings" (Khan et al., 2023). As humans, we instinctively recognise the intricate relationship between sports and wellbeing and how the two go hand in hand – whether it is jumpstarting our day with an invigorating run, unwinding with a sunset beach swim, or engaging in a spirited game of football with friends on weekends. Against this backdrop we asked: how can we effectively cultivate a sense of wellbeing through sports and foster emotional and mental stability in young individuals during their formative years? Enter the Move Your Emotions! program, an innovative initiative developed by the Family Rural Resilience Program (FRRP) at Centacare New England North West (NENW) based in Regional New South Wales, Australia.

## Overview of Program History

This paper describes the elements of the Moves Your Emotions! program, a component of the Family Rural Resilience Program (FRRP), and the positive intervention and outcomes of the program to date. FRRP is an early intervention, mental health and wellbeing program for young people aged 0-18 years old and their families. FRRP is delivered to young people and schools in the New England North West area, which is geographically larger than Tasmania and has supported students and their families for over 10 years. In just this amount of time, the FRRP has serviced over 4800 clients in various settings including, but not limited to, Early Childhood Education Services, Primary Schools, High Schools, Community Groups, Community Events, Transitions and play groups. The program is a free and flexible intervention program that is federally funded through the Department of Social Services. This allows FRRP to go into rural and remote communities to deliver much needed services and support tailored to the needs of the schools and the community.

Crafted by Centacare NENW, Move Your Emotions! is a free, 5-week sports-based program dedicated to enhancing mental health and overall wellbeing among children and adolescents. In response to feedback from local schools reporting a noticeable rise in conflicts and disruption during informal recess

and lunchtime sports activities, Centacare NENW took proactive measures. Recognising the tangible benefits of physical activity for overall wellbeing and the common interest of sports, this program was initiated to address the conflict issues with a hands-on approach. Thus, a specialised sports-based intervention was developed, focused on fostering positive social interactions and aimed at targeting social and emotional learning to mitigate conflict within the playground setting and improve the emotional and mental wellbeing of students.

Move Your Emotions! focuses on key areas including conflict resolution, emotional regulation, resilience, self-esteem, team building, communication, empathy, social skills, anger management, and fostering healthy relationships. Move Your Emotions! models Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, Mindfulness, and Narrative Therapy within a flexible sporting environment to address emotional regulation and social interaction challenges. Through a comprehensive analysis of program structure, outcomes, and testimonials, this paper illuminates the transformative potential of Move Your Emotions! in enhancing rural youths' resilience and fostering positive mental health outcomes. Mental health conditions in adolescence that are left untreated can result in challenges later in life (Khan et al., 2023). Therefore, as observed by Australian researchers, "identifying modifiable risk factors for mental health is critical to inform strategies to aid prevention efforts" (Khan et al., 2023). Move Your Emotions! is an early intervention aimed at reducing the risk of future mental health problems in our young people.

## Program Objective

The overarching objective of the Move Your Emotions! program is to equip children and adolescents with vital emotional regulation skills while nurturing positive social interactions through engaging in sports-based activities. At its core, the program seeks to provide young individuals with practical tools and strategies that are integrated into and alongside the sporting activities, to manage their emotions effectively, fostering resilience and wellbeing. Engaging in the sporting activities also teaches valuable social and emotional skills. When kids play on teams, they learn how to cooperate and communicate with others. They build trust and support each other, which helps with friendships and teamwork. Leading a team or making decisions during a game helps them develop leadership and problem-solving skills. Dealing with wins and losses teaches resilience and perseverance. Plus, managing emotions like excitement or frustration allows growth in emotional regulation.

Furthermore, the program imparts fundamental sporting techniques and a comprehensive understanding of game rules, reducing the need for intervention during play and similar activities. Simultaneously, the program strives to cultivate a positive relationship with physical activity, thereby mitigating the likelihood of body image concerns, fostering healthy self-esteem, and promoting confident engagement in peer relationships through team sports and clubs. By emphasising both skill development and psychological wellbeing, the program endeavours to equip children with the tools and mindset necessary for a lifetime of active, confident participation in sports and recreational activities.

Towards the program's culmination, the ultimate objective is to witness a tangible transformation in the students' play dynamics, integrating the strategies they have been equipped with in real-time situations. The duration of the 5-week program is strategically designed to ensure consistency and reinforce the implementation of these strategies over time. By providing a sustained and structured environment for development and practice, the program maximises the likelihood of improved wellbeing and provides students with new skills that they can apply beyond the program's duration.

## Session Elements

Before each session begins, our facilitators kick things off with a check-in activity. While the format may vary depending on the group's dynamics, one example involves passing around a ball with different emotions printed on it. As students catch the ball, they flip it to the emotion that resonates with them at that moment. Then, they share with the group why they are feeling that way. For instance, "I'm feeling excited because we're playing soccer today," or "I'm feeling sad because we're playing basketball instead of football." This simple yet effective exercise equips students with the tools to gauge their emotions and fosters open communication from the get-go. This initial interaction lays the foundation for building rapport and enriching the students' emotional vocabulary, a practice repeated in every session.

Following this, the group launches into a familiar upbeat game, such as duck, duck, goose or bullrush which serves as an effective icebreaker. This approach is particularly valuable as the participants often include peers who may have been involved in playground conflicts.

Between the sporting activities, often whilst students are catching their breath and sitting down having a water break, our facilitators seamlessly integrate Cognitive Behaviour Therapy interventions. The most important and frequently used cognitive technique

is the use of questions that encourage the patient to break through rigid patterns of dysfunctional thinking and to see new perspectives. The two terms most often used to describe this form of inquiry are Socratic questioning (asking questions that guide the patient to become actively involved in finding answers) and guided discovery (a series of questions that help the patient explore and change maladaptive cognitive processes) (Wright, 2006).

These interventions vary from week to week, addressing specific targets outlined for that session. For instance, activities may involve exploring triggers; we use age-appropriate visual aids, such as a human silhouette, to illustrate the physical sensations of anger. Alternatively, students may engage in discussions on coping strategies for sadness, drawing from concepts like the resilience doughnut.[1] Each week, the focus evolves, ensuring a holistic approach to emotional wellbeing and skill development.

Following this, the session transitions to the next game, which focuses more on skill development within the students' chosen sport. For instance, if soccer is the sport of interest, we engage the students in the traffic light game, in which each student is given a soccer ball and is presented with challenges related to ball control and technique. This phase often elicits heightened emotions among the participants. As facilitators observe emotional responses emerging, they prompt students to identify their emotions and promptly employ the strategies they have learned. This may involve pausing the game to discuss suitable strategies for emotional regulation in real-time. All students are encouraged to implement these strategies until their emotions stabilise. The effectiveness of this approach becomes increasingly evident from week 1 to the program's conclusion, particularly as students begin identifying triggers during the initial phase.

After this segment, students are encouraged to reflect on the preceding activities, highlighting both successful aspects and areas for improvement. Through scenarios presented to them, students collaborate to explore healthy strategies for hypothetical situations, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Subsequently, the session transitions to structured gameplay scenarios. The objective here is to create opportunities for challenges to arise, allowing students to actively apply the strategies they have learned throughout the program. As conflicts or emotional dysregulation emerge, students are provided with the chance to self-regulate before facilitators intervene. The frequency of such occurrences diminishes over the course of the program because of the interventions and strategies imparted throughout the sessions.

To wrap up each session, we guide students through a mindfulness ritual to promote calm and reflection. They are encouraged to find a comfortable space where gentle yoga exercises help them unwind and quiet their minds. Eventually, they are guided into a position for deep listening and guided meditation. This practice not only relaxes them but also allows for reflection before the session ends. By including these moments of mindfulness, we aim to cultivate self-awareness and emotional regulation skills, empowering students to manage stress in their daily lives.

During the conclusion, facilitators provide a check-out opportunity for children to reflect on their emotional state. They are encouraged to express any lingering emotions or thoughts from the session. Additionally, facilitators issue a challenge, such as incorporating "I am" statements[2] into their daily lives, to reinforce learned strategies. This process reinforces session lessons and encourages continued application of the strategies beyond the program's duration.

## Program Breakdown

WEEK 1: Identify Emotions, Emotional Regulation
WEEK 2: Conflict Resolution/Communication
WEEK 3: Anger Management
WEEK 4: Emotional Regulation/Conflict Resolution
WEEK 5: Resilience/Revision

Session breakdown example:

| | |
|---|---|
| Check In: | How am I feeling today? |
| Game: | Duck, Duck Goose |
| Intervention: | Where do I feel my triggers on my body, then what can I do? |
| Skill: | Traffic Light Game |
| Discussion/Revise: | How did it make me feel? What went wrong/what went well? |
| Game: | Soccer |
| Mindfulness: | Yoga, guided meditation |
| Challenge: | "I am" statements |
| Check Out: | How am I feeling now? |

[1] The Resilience Doughnut helps children, adolescents and adults to identify and combine their strengths to build resilience. See https://www.theresiliencedoughnut.com.au/

[2] "I am..." statements are a way of expressing our emotions in a clear way. Instead of blaming others for how we feel or keeping our emotions bottled up, "I am feeling" statements help us to take ownership of our feelings and communicate them effectively. For example, instead of saying, "You make me mad," we might say, "I am feeling upset because of what happened." These statements promote healthy communication, foster understanding in relationships, and help to regulate our emotions. https://thriveworks.com/help-with/communication/i-statements/

## Expected Outcomes

From this program, several positive outcomes are expected:

- Enhanced Emotional Awareness: Through regular check-ins and discussions about emotions, students develop a deeper understanding of their own emotional states and those of others. They learn to identify and express their feelings more effectively, leading to improved emotional intelligence.
- Improved Social Skills: Participation in group activities and discussions fosters teamwork, cooperation, and communication among students. As they engage in collaborative problem-solving and reflection, students develop stronger interpersonal skills and learn to navigate social interactions confidently, this then leads to healthier peer relationships.
- Enhanced Coping Strategies: The integration of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy interventions provides students with practical tools for managing their emotions and coping with challenging situations. By practicing these strategies in real-time scenarios, students build resilience and develop effective coping mechanisms.
- Skill Development: The program's focus on skill development within the chosen sport allows students to improve their athletic abilities while also learning important life skills such as perseverance, determination, and discipline. Understanding basic rules of the games creates improved confidence, as the game is well executed.
- Mindfulness and Relaxation: The inclusion of mindfulness rituals at the end of each session promotes relaxation and reflection. Students learn techniques for calming their minds and bodies, helping them to manage stress and anxiety both during the program and in their daily lives.
- Continual Growth and Reflection: The reflection activities at the end of each session provide students with opportunities to assess their progress, identify areas for improvement, and set goals for themselves. This process encourages continual growth and self-improvement.

Overall, the program aims to empower students with valuable life skills, promoting positive social interactions, developing a deep understanding of sporting being an outlet for mental health and supporting their emotional wellbeing, ultimately equipping them to navigate challenges.

## Evidence of Outcomes

The impact of Move Your Emotions! is palpable, with anecdotal evidence and testimonials attesting to its transformative effects. Participants, initially struggling with emotional regulation and cooperative play, exhibit remarkable progress by the program's conclusion. Notable differences in communication, emotional regulation and conflict resolution are evident within the first 3 sessions of the program. Feedback from schools who have received Move Your Emotions! delivery, report tangible benefits, including reduced schoolyard disruptions and decreased reliance on staff intervention for conflicts.

We further note that research shows that in adolescent populations, physical activity has numerous positive effects, including improvements in sleep, self-esteem, and psychological distress (Murphy et al., 2021) not only in the playground but also within the classroom and during weekend sporting events.

Through monitoring and evaluation, Centacare NENW has generated compelling evidence pulled from the Partnership Approach Data, which is provided to the Department of Social Services (DSS), of its effectiveness in empowering young individuals and strengthening family units. Key indicators such as children's age-appropriate development, community participation, family functioning, mental health and wellbeing, and education and skills training have seen an impressive 97.7% positive and neutral outcome rate. Moreover, goals related to behavioural changes, empowerment, choice and control, and skills development have achieved an even higher success rate of 98.1% within that reporting period.

Since its inception, Move Your Emotions! has made a significant impact, having been implemented in schools over a 98,000km radius, reaching a minimum of 345 students within a 15 month period. This represents the needs met of the target student population within rural and remote schools across the expansive New England North West region. In these remote communities, where access to mental health resources and support can be limited, the program's reach is particularly vital, addressing the unique challenges faced by students in rural areas. Through the Partnership Approach, data shows the satisfaction rating within this reporting period was 4.86 out of 5, which underscores its effectiveness and positive reception within these communities. Moreover, Move Your Emotions! highlights the profound connection between mental health and sports, harnessing the power of physical activity to nurture emotional resilience and well-being among rural youth.

## Case Study

In this case study, we delve into the transformative journey of Ben, a year 5 student facing challenges with resilience, anger and emotional regulation. Identified as a participant for the Move Your Emotions! program by Centacare New England North West, Ben struggled with controlling his emotions, often leading to altercations during school playtime. Despite his love for football and his mates, his difficulties in managing his feelings hindered his ability to fully engage in the game, resulting in social exclusion and feelings of loneliness.

Ben initially exhibited reluctance to participate throughout the 5-week program and frequently experienced emotional outbursts. However, with the support of facilitators employing a strength-based approach and CBT (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy), Ben gradually began to utilise the strategies taught in the program. By the fourth week, he not only demonstrated improved emotional regulation but also extended his assistance to peers facing similar challenges.

Following the program's conclusion, remarkable progress was observed in Ben's behaviour. He successfully applied the learned strategies in real-time situations, effectively communicated his feelings, and awaited social cues from his peers during playtime. Additionally, 4 weeks post-program, Ben continued to exhibit enhanced emotional regulation skills, effectively diffusing potential conflicts during a football game and fostering positive social interactions with his peers.

Feedback from teachers and caregivers highlighted a significant improvement in Ben's emotional well-being and resilience. His caregivers reported increased happiness, improved communication, and a notable reduction in temper tantrums at home. Reflecting on his journey, Ben expressed his newfound sense of happiness and control over his emotions, emphasising the positive impact of the program on his life.

Through Ben's story, we witness the transformative power of the Move Your Emotions! program in empowering young individuals to navigate challenges, foster resilience, and cultivate meaningful connections, ultimately paving the way for a brighter and more fulfilling future.

> *'I am feeling happy 'cause I have friends again and I don't get into trouble anymore and I can control how I feel.'* - Ben, October 2023.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Move Your Emotions! exemplifies the transformative potential of integrating sports and well-being to address the mental health needs of youth. By leveraging the benefits of sports to promote emotional resilience, physical health, and social connection, this initiative not only equips participants with essential coping skills but also fosters a culture of well-being within regional and rural communities. As we continue to prioritise the mental health of rural populations, initiatives like Move Your Emotions! serve as powerful catalysts for positive change, empowering youth to thrive both on and off the field while upholding and supporting youths' rural life.

The Move Your Emotions! program creates a sense of achievement, social and emotional competency and healthy wellbeing for children and adolescents who face challenges with emotional regulation and social interaction. Through its innovative blend of sports-based activities and evidence-based interventions, the program equips participants with vital life skills, promotes positive peer relationships, and cultivates emotional resilience. As the case study of Ben shows, the program can have impact beyond the playground, enriching other aspects of a child's life. From heightened emotional awareness and improved social skills to the development of effective coping strategies and mindfulness practices, Move Your Emotions! empowers young individuals to navigate life's challenges while fostering a healthy relationship with sports. Through continued support and advocacy, we can ensure that every child can thrive and function throughout their life.

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PRACTICE INSIGHTS

# Message Stick Action Research Project

**Jack Archibald,** Child, Youth, and Family Worker, Interrelate
**Lachlan Skinner,** First Nations Community Development Worker, Interrelate

**A narrative based cultural action research approach to improving transitions from primary school to high school for young Aboriginal Australian students in a rural area.**

## Introduction

The Message Stick program aims to decolonise current mentoring approaches through traditional practice that promote cultural connection, identity, and educational transition through group yarning circles where diverse voices and stories are amplified, respected, and passed on between generations.

The Message Stick Program was developed by First Nations Workers from Interrelate; these workers work from a narrative culturally based framework to support young people and their families in the transition from primary to high school, working alongside school, Elders, and community. This paper outlines the drivers for developing the Message Stick Program in the NSW North Coast Gumbaynggirr region, and the aims and early outcomes of the program, elicited through action research.

## Background to developing the Message Stick Program

From a national perspective, statistically First Nations young people's attendance and engagement is 10% lower than their non-indigenous counterparts (Department of the Prime Minister Cabinet, 2020; ACARA, 2019). Locally, family and Elders in our North Coast Gumbaynggirr region have, for some time, raised concerns about the lower rates at which our First Nations young people experience successful transition from primary to high school when compared to the general cohort of young people. What they thought could be the main contributor was a cultural disconnection which looks like:

- Not knowing who your mob is
- Not growing up on country
- Not having access to key Elders/members of community
- Disconnection to story and/or language
- Decreased or no participation with cultural practices
- Knowing they are Aboriginal but not knowing what that means.

The workers propose that what the Elders see as cultural disconnection leads to what educators describe as emotional regulation difficulties, decreased school attendance, disengagement with learning and loss of community support. According to Sarra (2011) the point of transition from primary to high school is a time where there is increased risk of disengagement for First Nations students.

These factors make it hard for the First Nations students to transition from a small community-focused primary school to a larger, less connected high school. From incidental feedback received during the work, what stood out was the need to map the relevant voices around young people's needs through the transition.

Elders and community members said they thought the young people were missing their connection to identity and culture, as they witnessed an increase in young people of High School age wandering the streets during school days.

One Community member said as part of our consultation that "Culture and Identity is important because Identity is our sense of self and sense of belonging. Understanding our cultural heritage allows us, as Aboriginal people, to recognise and appreciate the deep connection we have to our country." This statement addresses the integral role that culture plays in fostering identity, sense of self and belonging which supports First nations young people with their school transition.

Lukey et al. (2024) highlighted the term "Bridging Practices" as key to creating connections and collaboration between the school, First Nations young people, their family, communities, culture and country at the time of transition to high school. The Message Stick addresses this by focusing on relationships, mentoring, community-school partnerships, and a strengths-based approach.

The identification of these needs led to the development of the Message Stick pilot program run over 2022-2023 and 2023-2024.

## Cultural Significance of Message Stick

The First Nations workers brainstormed ideas for a cultural program that met the identified need from consultation with educators, community, and young people. The Interrelate First Nations Practice Specialist suggested the use of the physical Message Stick. A Message Stick varies in size and shape and is traditionally used by First Nations people, when moving between two places. It carries messages visually displaying symbols that communicate story and knowledge.

Styles vary but are generally a length of wood with phrases, story art or topics expressed in language. Local people in Gumbaynggirr Country say a Message Stick would be traditionally made from Blackbutt or Bloodwood.

Previously in their case management and group work, the workers had successfully incorporated culture with First Nations young people to improve their wellbeing. They wondered if borrowing from this idea might improve the transition of First Nations Young People moving between primary school to high school.

The First Nations workers took on the challenge of exploring how they might bring Elders, community, and educational stakeholders together and incorporate cultural traditions to improve transition for young First Nations people.

This program is specifically aimed at year 6 First Nations young people transitioning from primary school to high school in the coming year.

## Aims of the Message Stick Program

The Message Stick Program was devised to address the previously mentioned factors that influence the successful transition to, and sustained engagement in, high school for young people.

The program facilitates support for the following needs:

- Identity: The Message Stick program aims to promote a sense of cultural identity by providing opportunities for students to engage in activities that celebrate culture and share knowledge/stories. Through cultural art activities, storytelling sessions and yarning circles with community members and teachers, students can develop a deeper understanding of their cultural identity. This exploration helps strengthen their sense of self and belonging, providing a strong foundation as they transition to High School.
- Cultural Safety: The Message Stick program encourages participants to feel comfortable sharing their stories and creates safe and connected opportunities to practice culture in the school environment.
- Connection to Community: The Message Stick program aims to facilitate a partnership between community and educators in support of the participants.
- Intergenerational transfer of Knowledge: Through yarning circles, the Message Stick aims to allow participants, educators, Elders, and community to share stories which enhances pride and amplifies the voices of young people.

- Increased Confidence: The passing of a message stick around a yarning circle increases confidence by representing equal participation and respect for each person's voice. As it travels, the message stick signifies shared ownership of the conversation, fostering active listening and engagement from the group. This emphasis on equality and inclusivity challenges any existing power dynamics and decolonises some of the current approaches that privilege certain voices over others.
- Relationship Building: The Message Stick program aims to foster a key relationship with their buddy, who accompanies them through the transitions.

## Transition to High School

Moving from primary school to high school is a key transition for all young people. First Nations students often face greater challenges during this shift, as noted by local educators and stakeholders. However, limited research exists to delve into their specific needs. Addressing this gap is crucial to ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all students. By conducting targeted research and implementing culturally responsive practices, educators can better understand and address the unique obstacles faced by First Nations students, fostering smoother transitions, and promoting academic success.

## Action Research

The Action Research process was chosen to assist in the development and continuous evaluation of the Message Stick Program. The action research involves a range of support activities including a plan, act, observe and reflect approach. This is referred to as the "Action research primer" developed by Lizz Orr and Dr Peter Ninnes.

The participation and engagement of young people and stakeholders is foundational to the action research process. The Action Research model focuses on utilising a holistic view that seeks to identify and solve problems from consultation with a variety of stakeholders i.e. Elders, community members and educators. Stakeholders are encouraged to freely share their thoughts and opinions during each of the steps within the Action Research process. Data is then collected from a variety of sources to inform the direction of change in this repeated approach.

This holistic approach is consistent with narrative approaches used by the First Nations workers, it incorporates all voices over generations of the program, it allows for ongoing evaluation and development based on the voice of participants and has been used successfully in First Nations contexts previously.

The Message Stick program is funded by a non-indigenous organisation, Interrelate. Given this, the Action Research model elevates the relationships between the cultural stakeholders, Elders and community and educational stakeholders, and the schools resulting in sustainable support for young people.

Using a community-led approach meant the program could acknowledge and address the barriers that exist for First Nations young people such as mistrust, isolation, and colonisation by being guided with their own stories rather than the dominant narrative. This empowers them to reclaim their traditional narratives and identities through storytelling, as highlighted by Kickett-Tucker (2014).

In the program, young people were given the opportunity to buddy up with a high school student to create a message stick that tells their story of the journey between two symbolic spaces – in this case the 'distance' between primary and high school. The message stick would help the student carry their story and knowledge into this new stage of life.

## Action Research and Message Stick Program

### Step 1 – Plan

Consultations are undertaken via individual conversations with the following stakeholders to develop and continuously evaluate the program:

- Department of Education: Assistant Principal of Learning and Support/School Teachers
- Aboriginal Education Officers/Student Support Officers
- Jagun Elders Group: Coordinator/Elders Support/ Elders
- Community Organisations
- Aboriginal Corporations
- Police Aboriginal Liaison Officer.

### Step 2 – Act – Delivering the Message Stick Program

This program is delivered over 5 sessions which begins in the final year of primary school for the transitioning students. In the recruitment phase of the Program, the workers would engage with a local small school where the majority of students are transitioning into the same high school. As a result of this process, the school would confirm the number of First Nations Year 6 Students. The workers would collaborate with the High School Teachers to select the same number of Aboriginal Mentors that display leadership amongst peers and who have the potential to lead by example

for the students transitioning into high school. The empirical research states that older school students were found to be effective mentors in several studies with such peers being role models for people with the same cultural background (Crooks et al. 2015; Crooks et al. 2010; Mander, Cohen, and Pooley 2015).

In the initial session of the program, the workers meet at the primary school with the transitioning students and then at the high school with the chosen mentors. During these sessions, the workers consult with the students in relation to the program and its content. This session includes the creation of a 'Shame Mat' which is a method used when facilitating the program's yarning circle group conversations. The 'Shame Mat' method, a core component, further reinforces the commitment to creating safe and non-judgmental spaces where stories can be shared, re-authored, and celebrated within cultural knowledge and values (Hankin & Major, 2008).

In the second session, the workers meet with all parties at the high school, where the workers facilitate icebreaker activities to build rapport and establish relationships between the primary and high school students and teachers. The activities involved outdoor interactions where they would move around freely and shift from group-to-group learning about each other and what they were interested in. Elders are also invited to share cultural knowledge of the Message Stick, and the importance of identity and practicing culture.

In the third and fourth session, the workers meet with all parties at the high school, where the session begins in a yarning circle and participants are invited to share thoughts, concerns, and stories as a group. The participants are allocated buddies to work together to promote connectivity within the Message Stick Program. The buddy concept plays a significant role as their presence can help validate the transitioning student to experience and foster a sense of connection within a witness structure (Denborough, 2014) to invite a re-telling of their story through their unique lens.

Shannahan (2017) suggests that "Involving friends in the therapeutic process opens the door to co-creating new narratives together." This collaborative effort can lead to a deeper bond among friends and create a shared sense of purpose and growth. As friends engage in the narrative process, over time, they can help externalize problems and challenges, distancing them from the young person's identity.

In adapting and innovating narrative practice within Aboriginal communities, it is important to be mindful of the unique cultural and historical context that shapes individuals' experiences. This includes recognising the impacts of colonisation, dispossession, and systemic oppression on Aboriginal identity and wellbeing (Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips, & Williamson, 2011). Message Stick aims to centre cultural strengths and resilience within the yarning circle activities, rather than preserving deficit-based narratives.

The yarning circle's physical arrangement is equally crucial for promoting equality and inclusivity. With everyone seated at the same level, no one is elevated or marginalised, reinforcing the principle that every voice is equally valued. This seating fosters unity and solidarity, emphasising our shared journey of cultural connection and identity exploration.

The third and fourth sessions also include the creation of the message stick. Within these sessions, the group revisits stories shared by local Elders whilst in smaller groups with buddies, working on their message sticks, speaking about things important to them as they use symbols, words and colours to express themselves through their transition journey.

The final session is a celebration and reflection of their Message Stick journey. The workers meet with all parties at the high school. The session includes First Nations young people, Elders and stakeholders contributing to a collective documentation project preserving heritage and empowering them to share significant stories with future generations. This occurs by centering culture, exploring stories of strength, resistance, resilience, and reconnecting with identity through re-membering techniques. The Message Stick can be adapted as a traditional tool to deconstruct dominant discourses of the educational system and recognise the young participants as the experts in their journey.

This session includes a presentation of the young peoples' message stick, certificates, and a smoking ceremony. This ceremony is traditionally used to cleanse bad spirits when transitioning between spaces. It also encourages good spirits to walk with one through future journeys. Whilst preparing the smoking ceremony, CEO (Chief Executive Officer) of Bularri Muurlay Nyanggan Aboriginal Corporation shared with participants "You all have the right to education, but you have the responsibility to use your education and to look after each other as Goori students in your school and make sure you empower one another on this journey."

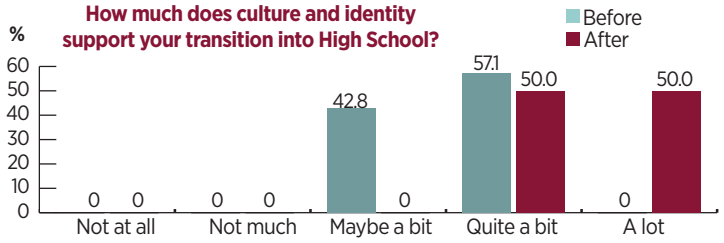
### Step 3 – Collect (Data) / Observe

Throughout the program, feedback was collected from Elders, teachers, principals, students and community about the program content, how it has been received and whether the program is culturally supportive.

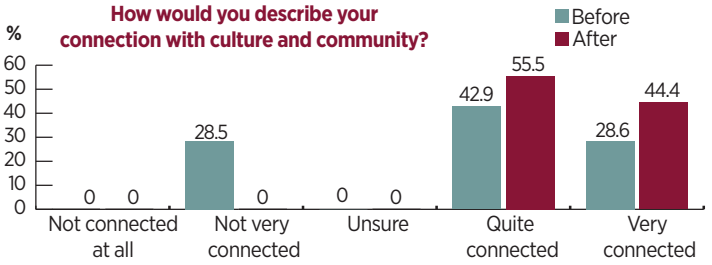
Individual and collective feedback was sought using individual surveys as well as gathering feedback in the form of a collective document collating reflections made up of drawings and stories by students, teachers, Elders and community. The collective document reflects cultural practice of knowledge sharing between generations and is also used as a Narrative Therapy approach.

Developmental and cultural considerations were considered when gathering information.

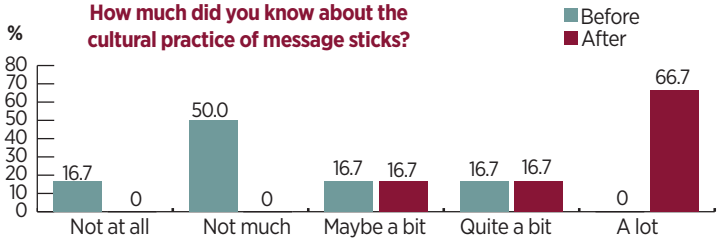
- Identity



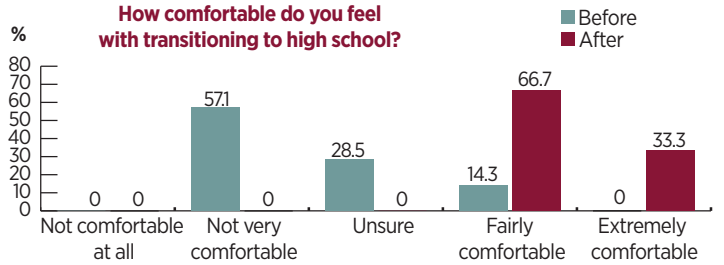

- Connection to Community



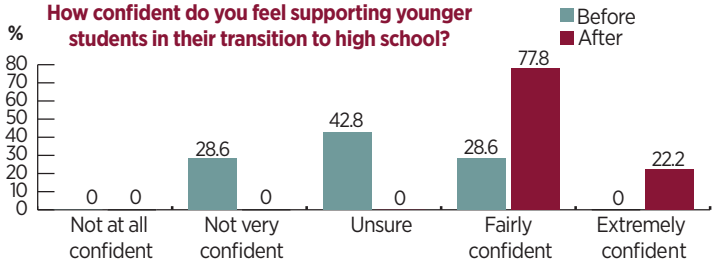

- Intergenerational transfer of Knowledge




- Increased Confidence



• Leadership/Relationship Building




### Step 4 – Reflect

At the completion of the first pilot, the workers used a traditional circle to yarn with the Elders about their reflections, stories, and their ways of imagining the future message stick program.

The workers listened to the participants' feedback from the program in surveys, verbal feedback, Elders' feedback, comments from teachers and student check-ins.

Following the initial session of the second pilot, the workers recorded a process interviewing each other about what they noticed showed up for them and for the participants during the program. Further reflecting on these observations created a deeper and more lengthy reflection we named a podcast.

An agreement has been made with the schools for a longitudinal survey at a future time, to gain insights about the sustainability of the program in supporting the transition to high school for each cohort of students from the 2 Message Stick pilots.

## Conclusion

To conclude, although the Message Stick Program is a pilot program, the results of the action research reveal a strong indication that the delivery of cultural learning, connection to country, fostering peer relationships through mentors, establishing collaborative partnerships and safe ways to practice culture can influence the challenges faced during the transition from primary to high school.

By embedding cultural practices such as yarning circles and the creation of message sticks, the program fosters a sense of belonging, confidence, and resilience among participants. It challenges existing power dynamics, amplifies diverse voices, decolonises through reclaiming traditional narratives, empowering young people to navigate their educational journey with pride and purpose.

As we continue to gather insights and refine our approach through ongoing action research, we are committed to raising sustainable support systems that uphold the rights and responsibilities of Aboriginal students in their educational journeys.

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# Children's mental health when experiencing multiple adversities:

## Practice skills for effective conversational maps

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## Introduction

Family and relationship services understand that children's mental health issues occur in the context of social divisions and hierarchies across multiple dimensions, drawing attention to both the complexity and diversity of experiences of trauma, conflict, bullying and family separation (Wendt, et al., 2023; Our Watch & Women with Disabilities Victoria, 2022). Given that no individual practitioner can be a specialist in all issues experienced by children, practitioners have focused on developing robust conversational maps, rather than providing 'expert' advice. The skilful use of conversational maps helps children and families describe the context of their problems, as well as the active steps they have taken to overcome the effects of problems on their lives. To develop these conversational maps, family and relationship practitioners have become adept at listening to stories outside the scope of their speciality or expertise. Trauma informed practice, for example, has developed in part from the experiences of non-specialist practitioners listening to stories about childhood sexual, physical and emotional abuse (Moss & Klapdor, 2022). This does not mean that all family and relationship practitioners are experts in the assessment or diagnoses of neurobiological or psychological effects of trauma. Instead, they utilise skills to help children describe their active steps in keeping themselves or others safe or resisting the effects of violence in their lives (Emerging Minds, 2022). These skills provide new interpretations of past events for children that help them move beyond self-blame (Carey, 2017).

Children invariably describe a raft of challenges in their everyday lives that extend beyond a singular issue or diagnosis (Azar et al., 2020). Family and relationship services recognise that not all families have the means or support to attend multiple appointments with the specialist services who can respond to each of their adversities (Radez et al., 2021; Herbert, 2021). But what are the generalist skills and conversational maps that are needed by family and relationship practitioners to attend to the varied and complex stories of children? How can practitioners attend to children's mental health when they are affected by multiple issues? How do they ensure that children's safety is prioritised when they discuss painful or co-occurring experiences such as trauma, bullying or parental separation?

This paper examines 5 practice perspective shifts that are often utilised by family and relationship practitioners who want to engage with children about every aspect of their lives. The 5 practice perspective shifts are a set of positions taken up by practitioners who want to prioritise children's ability to tell their stories in their own ways, using their own language (Emerging Minds, 2019). The paper examines the history and development of these practice perspective shifts and how they can be used in work with children and families who present to services with a broad range of experiences. The authors have used the common practice examples of childhood trauma, bullying and parental separation to examine how practitioners employ generic skills to support children to tell their stories.

## Background

Family and relationship services in Australia have a rich history of 'no wrong door' practice that has evolved in recognition of the multiple, co-existing disadvantages faced by many clients. Perhaps the clearest example of this has been the evolution of 'marriage guidance' services which were originally established to provide newly married couples advice on how to live with each other for the first time but over time broadened in response to regular presentations of family breakdown and gendered violence, spawning the creation of specialised family violence services, family mental health services and children's contact services.

As family and relationship services evolved in Australia, they have become well practiced in providing responses to a raft of adult adversities and mental health issues that were exacerbated by family conflict, gendered violence, historical child abuse, poverty, disadvantage and substance use. Although not all services worked directly with children, child-aware practice frameworks were developed in recognition of the effects of parental adversity on children's social and emotional wellbeing (Price-Robertson & Hunter, 2014). An example of this has been the groundbreaking work of Relationships Australia South Australia in screening for childhood safety risk in every parent who uses their post separation services (Wells et al., 2018).

In more recent times, services have been created to work specifically with children about the effects of adversity on their lives and a skilled and cost-effective child-specific workforce has developed in family and relationship services (Centre for International Economics, 2023). Family and relationship services are uniquely placed to provide services to children in Australia because they operate outside of the broader child protection or mental health systems that most often require notification or diagnosis to facilitate service engagement (Centre for International Economics, 2023).

The diagnosis of specific, individual mental health issues in children has never been more common, with the development of tools such as the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders reinforcing these practices (Epstein, Weisner & Duda, 2013). While diagnosis for many children leads to essential professional or medical support, social services data shows that children most often present with multiple, interactive issues that affect every element of their daily lives (Dalgliesh et al., 2020). Long waist lists for diagnosis can also mean that children and families need to access family and relationship services while they await specialised mental health treatment (Radez et al., 2021).

It is common for children to present to services while awaiting a diagnosis, or having a current diagnosis, and family and relationships practitioners have learned to both listen to the contribution the diagnosis might make to the child's life, while catering for more than just the effects of children's mental or physical conditions (Price-Robertson & Schuurman, 2019). Where children have disabilities that affect their learning or communication development, family and relationship practitioners have actively resisted 'diagnostic overshadowing,' which can disqualify a focus on the whole child and view the child only through the prism of their diagnosis (Kanne, 2018).

The application of conversational maps and frameworks that transcend singular diagnoses with children creates possibilities for increased curiosity about every aspect of life, rather than only the identification and modification of one specific problem. This allows for greater flexibility in service delivery and a recognition in the increased interconnectivity of issues that affect children's mental health (Azar et al., 2020).

## Changes in practice perspectives

Emerging Minds has worked with a range of stakeholders – including many family and relationship practitioners – to develop 5 practice perspective shifts that can be utilised in any circumstance with children to help them tell their stories. These perspective shifts come from feedback from children who describe what they want from interactions from professionals (Carson et al., 2018; Moore, 2017; Griffiths-Cooke & Fenn, 2017). They are also influenced by practitioners' descriptions of the need to help children to tell their stories, which are so often silenced through experiences such as family and domestic violence, trauma, bullying, family breakdown and isolation (Moss & Dolman, 2018; Emerging Minds, 2020).

The practice shifts reflect an interest in the social context of children's lives and a commitment to encouraging children's participation and are accountable to their experiences. They are designed

to support practitioners to engage with both parents and children in ways that notice, acknowledge and build on children's strengths, skills and know-how. In situations of family breakdown and parental separation, the practice shifts support practitioners' curiosity to enquire about and make more visible the ways the child has been responding to the impacts of the separation in their life and relationships.

The 5 practice perspective shifts are:

### Passive to active

> *'If we don't have the boldness to create some space for children to tell their stories, then of course they won't see the use of coming to visit us. Allowing children access to these stories also allows space for unhelpful stories, beliefs and meanings to unfold. So, we can put these stories into context of adult-children power relationships in ways that might disable them. But more importantly, I want to bring forth children's stories of resistance and response, because they're the stories that can help children overcome depression, anxiety and self-hatred'.* David Tully, Relationships Australia, South Australia (Emerging Minds, 2021).

The passive to active perspective shift assumes that no child is a passive participant in their experiences of adversity and that they have already drawn on skills and know-how to navigate their circumstances. By maintaining curiosity in children's responses to adversities, practitioners can help children and families develop cracks in the dominant or problem stories, which so often underestimate the strategies that children implement to minimise or overcome the effects of problems (Carey, 2017). This shift also reinforces the need for children and families to contribute actively during professional engagement, rather than passively receive 'expert' advice on how to live their lives.

When children become used to considering only the problematic parts of their lives, they can become isolated from their preferences, intentions, skills and know-how (De Mol, D'Alcantara & Cresti, 2018). The passive to active perspective shift calls for practitioner curiosity into multiple aspects of children's lives, rather than only those aspects affected by adversity or their diagnosis. It prioritises attention to children's acts of response, protest or resistance to their experiences of adversity (Vermeire, 2022). It pays close attention to the small actions that they have made and what these actions say about what they give value to in their lives (Emerging Minds, 2022).

### Naïve to knowledgeable

> '*The naïve to knowledgeable practice position helps me to remember that children who have communication difficulties often don't have opportunities to express and demonstrate their knowledge. It's not that they are not the holders of that knowledge, but they need support and opportunities to express it.'* Kate Headley, Speech Pathologist (Emerging Minds, 2021).

A naïve to knowledgeable shift considers the language that children use, and how they interpret and describe events, objects and relationships. It does not seek to correct their 'faulty' descriptions or explain these descriptions as the effects of their diagnosis. Rather, the naïve to knowledgeable perspective shift genuinely attempts to see the world through the eyes of the children they meet with and the circumstances that are specific to them (Johnson, 2018; Marsten, Epstein & Markham, 2016). Children possess knowledge about the issues they are facing. They can define and describe these problems by drawing their own understandings, meanings and language, and deserve to be provided with the opportunity and space to do so.

Parents or carers might come to family and relationship services with a list of problems in relation to the child and the sense that nothing seems to be changing (Vermeire, 2022). This can position the practitioner as expert and centred, and the child as a problem that needs to be corrected (Vliegen, Tang & Meurs, 2022). Where children's behaviour is causing immediate safety concerns, they might be positioned as naïve, or lacking the maturity to look after themselves appropriately. Practitioners might feel a sense of urgency to correct the child and their behaviour. Where practitioners can avoid invitations to coerce children through immediate behaviour management, stories of the child's behaviour might become more accessible. Children who act out in the classroom or at home, for example, might be actively resisting a practice that they view as unfair. In this situation, having conversations with children about what they know about fairness is potentially more generative than imposing immediate correctional imperatives (Emerging Minds, 2021).

### Recipients to contributors

> *'Initially in the session I want to be curious about the child's interests and their strengths. And then at key points a door might swing open and the child might tell me about an event that happened in another context or tell me about a friendship they have had. These are key moments in the conversation and give me the chance to be curious about every aspect of the child's unique life'.* Ben Rogers, Occupational Therapist (Emerging Minds, 2021).

The recipients to contributors perspective shift supports children to join with adults to co-research solutions to the problems that affect their lives. It invites children to co-generate knowledge that can contribute to new perspectives about the events in their lives (Manion & Nixon, 2012). When practitioners begin to view children and their families as co-researchers, it becomes less necessary for them to have all the solutions. This de-centred perspective assumes that children attend therapy with a history of finding solutions to their problems. These solutions may not have always been successful, but in the retelling of the experience, children are able to demonstrate their resilience, attempts at connections with others, and the things that they most give value to in their lives (Vermeire, 2022).

It is possible that the effort that children have gone to in an attempt to make things better for themselves or those around them have never been acknowledged by anyone. It is also possible that the child themselves has never considered their own attempts at finding solutions. When a practitioner demonstrates curiosity about every aspect of the child's life, their relationships, their interests and their values, their meaningful contribution becomes more possible (Manion & Nixon, 2012).

When practitioners genuinely consider the place for contribution of children's stories in their own professional (or personal) lives, all sorts of learning can be derived from children's experiences. These contributions not only help children to consider their stories in more hopeful and generative ways, but it provides practitioners with opportunities to become more effective in what they do (Marsten, Epston & Markham, 2016).

### Categories to context

> *'Something that happens with kids who are being disruptive is that they can become a set of behaviours to be managed. Or an object to be managed. So, these children can experience gradual processes of objectification. As far as I am able, I want to re-subjectify the children I work with, or re-enliven their humanity and experience.'* Dr Jacki Amos, Centacare Adelaide. (Emerging Minds, 2021).

A child who has experienced misuse of power or adversity may present with ambivalence about the adults in their lives, even if those adults have not been responsible for their adversity (Vermeire, 2022). Therapeutic interventions with these children might locate their distrust or withdrawal from family members, educators or friends as an outcome of their disorder or as an effect of their adversity. These perspectives can risk positioning the child's internalising or externalising behaviours as dysfunctional responses to their current circumstances.

A focus on the context of children's lives considers how children make relational decisions according to the environment that surrounds them (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020). It is the non-judgmental curiosity about the decisions that children make that can shift practice emphasis from categorising or pathologising to an interest in their everyday experiences (Emerging Minds, 2019).

Learning how children make sense of their relationships can uncover much about what children hope for (Rupert, 2017; Yuen, 2018). If they are withdrawn or cautious with adults in their lives, this may reflect a protection mechanism that has helped to keep them safe. Children who are withdrawn or cautious with adults in their lives can sometimes be categorised as 'dysfunctional.' A categories to context perspective shift helps practitioners to focus on the active decisions children have made in withdrawing from relationships or exercising care. These decisions might actually say much about what children give value to in their lives, safety, self-care, judgment.

### Top-down to bottom-up accountability

> *'I want children to know that I meet with lots of young people. And usually young people will come and meet with me because someone in their lives has thought it was a good idea, or things are not going as well as a young person might like. And sometimes, kids think I am only interested in problems. But actually, I am interested in so much more than that and I want children to know that as much as possible.'* Lisa Johson, Child Psychologist (Emerging Minds, 2021).

Services and practitioners can shift from a solely 'top-down' way of working towards incorporating a 'bottom-up' view of accountability. Whilst hierarchical top-down accountabilities to the practitioner's agency, funders and salient evidence-based literature remain important, this shift prioritises understandings and practices of accountability towards those less powerful. This shift calls for practice approaches that are accountable and answerable to the child, as well as their parents and other concerned adults – in other words, to those most affected by the problem (Sargeant & Harcourt, 2012; Lambert & Glacken, 2011).

Bottom-up accountability might mean paying active attention to the small cues that a child's play, body language, or facial expressions can provide. The practitioner can become curious about why a child becomes animated, distracted, withdrawn, or

even angry, when specific topics are raised. Children's responses can therefore be seen as feedback to the practitioner regarding the effectiveness of the conversations they are facilitating. Rather than assessing responses as evidence of children's developmental or cognitive functioning, a bottom-up accountability shift positions children as experts and co-researchers in the conversational frameworks and strategies that best help them in their lives (Emerging Minds, 2020).

## The passive to active practice perspective shift in work with children who have experienced trauma

> *'We now know the importance of all practitioners being able to have conversations with children who decide to disclose abuse. Previously, when children attended even specialist child sexual abuse services, talk about the abuse was never initiated by the counsellor. There was this fear that if we talk about it the child might not be ready, it might make the trauma behavior worse, it might cause nightmares, or interfere with investigations. And without knowing it, the counsellor would help maintain secrecy.'* Clare Klapdor, Centacare, Adelaide (Moss & Klapdor, 2022)

The recent Australian Childhood Maltreatment study reaffirmed the strong links between economic and social disadvantage, multiple experiences of maltreatment and negative outcomes for children's long-term mental health (Haslam et al., 2023). The link between childhood trauma, mental health and other childhood adversities is now so clear that it is impossible to conceive of a service where responses to trauma are not viewed as core business.

Family and relationship practitioners are extremely familiar with working with children who are up against multiple challenges, and who are likely to have experienced at least one form of trauma in their lives (Moss & Klapdor, 2022). These children are often brought to practitioners because of immediate worries such as school refusal, risk taking behaviour or relationship breakdown. For good reason, adults are motivated by their hope for immediate change in these children's behaviour that facilitates less risk and more positive engagement. The immediacy can have practitioners using more didactic approaches with children that can disqualify story, particularly where children are up against multiple problems in their lives (Moss & Dolman, 2018).

Where children come to services with negative experiences of adult relationships and institutions, immediacy can serve to reinforce their withdrawal, or their assumption that they are a problem to be fixed (Brown, 2018).

The **passive to active practice** shift helps practitioners to practice patience in their engagement with children and their families who face multiple challenges in their lives. This is not to say that an exploration of the effects of the problem should be ignored, but practitioners can also glean much by children's stories of resistance to the problem (Carey, 2017).

> *'We treat children, youngsters and their families not as passive receivers of what happens in their lives while we do recognise and acknowledge that their sense of agency has often decreased. We widen the scope to include more than what is wrong and what supposedly causes the problems.' (Vermeire, 2022, pp. 34-35).*

When family and relationship practitioners broaden the scope of curiosity beyond just the effects of the problem, children can be supported to consider their relationship preferences and values. This provides the catalyst for meaning-making conversations with children which might lead to small differences in the ways they remember adverse events. Rather than only focusing on what they did not do and reinforcing self-blame, children might start to consider the responses they made in the face of adversity, even if these were small (Carey, 2015). Small acts of resistance or protest can be remembered for the first time and these acts can reshape how a child interprets the events of their lives (Carey, 2017).

Helping children to focus on the actions of protest or resistance they have taken throughout their lives may contribute to a minimisation of the effects of secrecy or self-blame on their mental health (Emerging Minds, 2022). It is important to note that the passive to active shift does not necessarily mean that children will disclose past trauma, or that family and relationship practitioners will enquire about trauma. There are ethical, safety and legal considerations for all non-specialist trauma practitioners (Guy, 2020). However, practitioners who use a passive to active perspective are more likely to hear multiple aspects of children's story from the point of view of their preferences, values and intentions. This has been supported by the implementation of trauma-informed practices in family and relationship services over the past decades.

## The categories to context and recipients to contributors practice perspective shift in work with children who are experiencing or engage in bullying behaviour

> '*There is no one size fits all model when it comes to bullying. We need to understand the contexts in which the behaviours are happening, and the child's ecology which might be affecting what is h*appening to them.' Dr Leslie-Anne Ey, University of South Australia (Rollbusch, 2023).

Given the increasingly wide reach of bullying due to the growth of communications technology, childhood bullying no longer exists only within the confines of the school environment (Dale et al., 2014). Family and relationship practitioners are increasingly working with children whose mental health is being negatively affected by bullying around the clock (Rollbusch, 2023).

Extended exposure to bullying – whether the child is experiencing or engaging in the behaviour – can reinforce children's negative views of themselves (Rollbusch, 2023). For children who are already facing adversity in their lives, bullying can serve to reinforce the deficit-based assumptions they have made about themselves. For some children, pre-existing experiences of adversity and disadvantage can impede their peer relationships in educational settings and increase the likelihood and effects of bullying (Tippet & Wolke, 2014).

Positive connections with family and peers, and within schools and other institutions, have been consistently demonstrated to be the most protective factors both for children who are experiencing and/or engaging in bullying behaviour (Bayer et al., 2018). For children who are already isolated and do not have access to the social supports that can help them make meaning of their bullying experiences, psychological effects are likely to be heightened. This can include higher rates of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm and suicidal ideation (Wolke et al, 2014).

Children who experience bullying behaviour are also more likely to have worries at school or avoid school resulting in poorer academic outcomes (Wolke et al., 2013). These children may then be incorrectly categorised as 'anxious,' 'naughty,' 'lazy,' or 'withdrawn.' These categories can attach themselves to negative identity conclusions that further exacerbate children's mental health issues. The repetitive element of bullying makes negative messages more impactful and erodes children's self-worth.

A child who views themselves, or who is categorised as a 'victim,' may come to view themselves as powerless or fragile (Moore et al, 2017).

The **categories to context** perspective shift helps to divert practitioners away from categorising children's experiences of bullying. Exploring the context of a child's experience in the classroom, online, or in other social settings helps provide a sense of the internal messages that are developed through the negative messaging the child is receiving.

Through exploring the meaning behind bullying behaviour, children can move away from feelings of self-blame. In making meaning, children can begin to understand that the messages they are receiving are not about them personally and are more likely a reflection of how the child engaging in the bullying is feeling. This work can begin by supporting children to understand the dynamics of bullying. That is, why bullying happens. Bullying is considered a goal-oriented behaviour for the children engaging in it (Sansom et al., 2022). It may be that they are trying to fit in socially or attempting to increase their feelings of power and control.

The **recipients to contributors** perspective shift is particularly relevant when working with children who are engaging in bullying behaviour. These children might see their bullying behaviour as reinforcement of their negative identity, which might have been developed through other adversities in their lives. We know that bullying behaviour can stem from several environmental influences that children have little control over (McLory et al., 2017).

When practitioners assume that children who engage in bullying behaviour are doing it because they are malicious or 'bad,' they can become recipients in coercive or rectifying therapy which might reinforce children's already negative beliefs about themselves (Emerging Minds, 2023a). Practitioners can work alongside children who engage in bullying behaviour to be curious about what is happening for them and explore their values and how these differ from their present behaviour. This type of practice ensures children are contributing to the therapeutic relationship and allows them to understand themselves and the bullying behaviour in a different way.

> '*I want to establish as rich an understanding of the child's values as I can. And then I might follow up with questions like, 'How long has that value been important to you?' 'How did that value start being important to you?' and 'Were there people who were inspirational to you in that value?*' Miriam Webb, Clinical Psychologist (Emerging Minds, 2023a).

## Top down to bottom-up accountability and naïve to knowledgeable practice perspective shifts with children who experience parental separation

> *'Parents and children can come to therapy with the understanding that they might be talked at. So, we try to begin the very first session with something surprising with the family so that they might get the feeling they won't be talked or lectured to, but rather invited in.'* Joanne Donne, Relationships Australia (SA) (Emerging Minds, 2023b).

Family conflict, separation and violence can mean that children and parents can present to services with a diminished sense of connection or trust in their relationships. This might mean that children and adults present to services with a sense of frustration or hopelessness that might manifest as anger or conflict.

For children that have experienced family conflict, violence or trauma they have often had many expectations placed upon them: at home, at school, and in either their biological families or in out-of-home care. Often, children can be judged according to their inability to live up to adults' expectations of them (Emerging Minds, 2020).

A shift from **top-down to bottom-up accountability** is about tailoring your support to the child's individual needs and preferences. These needs are seen as integral to every child, rather than evidence of the child's deficits. This shift assumes that careful and patient practice can challenge secrecy for all children.

Family and relationship practitioners have developed skilled and nuanced family-centred practice which supports the rebuilding of trust and relationship confidence after adversity. This often begins with a negotiation with children and parents regarding what they hope for from professional engagement. This conversation immediately shows children and parents that the practitioner is accountable and answerable to the child, as well as their parents and other concerned adults – in other words, to those most affected by the problem (Yuen, 2018; Rupert, 2017).

> *'It's extremely helpful to ask parents about what they think their children might be hoping for their engagement with me. This helps to build an understanding of what the parents know about their children's relationship with the problem and what they would like to happen in the future.'* Pshko Marden, Uniting Communities. (Emerging Minds, 2023b).

When children and parents can be supported to describe their hopes for engagement, invariably they will want similar outcomes: better relationships, happier times and less conflict. Once these joint goals are named, the child, adults and practitioner can set to work on negotiating therapeutic processes that will track progress against these goals. This negotiation can be seen to pave the way for shared processes that are accountable to the preferences and values of the child and adult (Emerging Minds, 2023b).

The practice shift from a **naïve to knowledgeable perspective** can be particularly supportive of practitioners engaging with children and their families in the context of parental separation.

When engaging parents in conversations about their children's wellbeing, concerns about the child or their behaviour can overshadow many aspects of the child's experience. This can lead parents and practitioners into rigid interpretations about the child's behaviour and generate misunderstandings about the child's view of the problem and its impacts on them. This can make it more difficult for parents to notice how the child is trying to respond to the impacts of the separation on their life, or adjust to their new circumstances in some way.

However, children invariably do take steps to lessen the negative impacts of separation on themselves, their parents and siblings. These responses act as a protective factor from the negative consequences of separation (Sorek, 2019).

These sometimes small, unnoticed steps that children take to lessen the impacts of the separation on themselves or those around them can provide a portal into a world of children's knowledge. This knowledge, performed and embodied or expressed in language most available and meaningful to them, reflects their insights and understandings about the difficulties they are facing. But more than that, it reflects their creativity, imagination and hard-won learnings about what is required of them and others to find a way through the impacts of the separation the family is facing.

Inviting parents to reflect on and describe what they have noticed about their child's responses to the separation provides them with an opportunity to consider, perhaps in a different way, what the child 'knows' and how the child views and makes sense of the problem.

> *'What I am interested in when working with parents is looking for the ways the young person is responding to the problem that doesn't fit their way of thinking of the young person has been responding to the problem. And so that is kind of bringing forth the young person's skills, knowledge, capacities to respond to the problem and make that more kind of visible.'* Pshko Marden, Uniting Communities. (Emerging Minds, 2023b).

These conversations re-position children as knowledged – as generators and safe-keepers of perspectives and understandings about their experiences of separation. It is no wonder that children navigating parental separation want opportunities to effectively participate in conversations and decisions that affect their lives (Carson et al., 2018).

Positioning children as knowledgeable can make a difference to how parents respond to the child. It can open up possibilities for alternative understandings and responses by the parent, including increased collaboration between the parent and child.

This also paves the way for more detailed descriptions in future conversations with children about their skills, know-how, capabilities and interests that they can summon to contend with the unhelpful impacts of separation on their life and relationships.

## Conclusion

'Where do I start with this family?' is a familiar question posed by practitioners when presented with the multiple co-existing issues faced by children and families (Moss & Dolman, 2018). When practitioners start to ask these questions, it is more likely that stories of hopelessness overwhelm both them and the children and families who they meet. Amidst this hopelessness, practitioners may stop listening for evidence of hopes, preferences, strengths or even concerns. This may lead to more direct and expert practice that fit with the assumption that children access services to be 'fixed' by an adult professional who knows more about their life events than they do. This paper has been inspired by the many family and relationship practitioners and services who actively take contrary positions and have developed maps for more generative, hopeful and bottom-up conversations. The family and relationship services sector continues to find innovative and creative ways to help children to tell their stories in whatever form this takes, and Emerging Minds has developed the 5 practice perspective shifts to support these practices.

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# Getting The Village Together:

## Integrated services boost young parents' resources, skills and connections

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## Introduction

In July 2021, YFS embarked on a significant service transformation project to understand what works to back at-risk young parents and their children to thrive. In partnership with the Charity of Freemasons Queensland, Hand Heart Pocket[1], YFS designed an integrated model that wraps a package of support around a young family tailored to their needs, goals and hopes for the future. It seeks to set young parents and their children up over the lifecourse by building the resources, skills and connections families need to succeed.

Established in 1983, YFS is a community-based organisation providing a range of services and resources to vulnerable children, young people, families and individuals living in Logan and surrounds. As a community, Logan is a fast growing, diverse, multicultural city which experiences both considerable social and economic disadvantage, and energy, pride and resilience. YFS is an integral part of the community, backing people to thrive and promoting their independence and participation in the community.

YFS' Step by Step program was a well-established family support program, delivering traditional case management services. In 2021 it adopted a new, integrated service model and transformed into the Step by Step Thriving Young Families initiative. The model includes long-term, relationship-based support to address immediate issues and build skills, plus specialist support on key areas such as housing, safe and healthy relationships, education and employment, therapeutic intervention and peer support. It was designed based on young parents' insights, evidence, and experience.

Participants set the direction and pace of the work and can choose which service offering components they access and when they use them. However, the components are integrated and mutually reinforcing. A team of multi-disciplinary practitioners work together to identify each family's needs and interests, link them with additional support as required, promote uptake and engagement in components that could be beneficial, and reinforce key messages and skills. For example, regulating skills and relationship skills are practiced across each program component.

[1] Hand Heart Pocket is an independent charity and philanthropic foundation established by the Freemasons of Queensland. They support evidence-based programs and initiatives that help improve outcomes for young people through philanthropic partnerships and impact investments.

A developmental evaluation covering the first 2 years of the Thriving Young Families initiative has shown promising results, with young parents and their children progressing towards thriving. It continues to evolve based on feedback from young parents, to ensure continued effectiveness now and into the future.

The process of getting the village together to boost young parents' resources, skills and connections was not straightforward. The road to results was longer than anticipated, and at times bumpy. It generated significant learning about both design and implementation of service integration, highlighting what it takes to effectively support young parents and their children to thrive.

## Unique needs of young parents

Young parents have unique needs compared with older parents and their non-parenting peers. As young people, they are still developing while also learning to navigate intimate relationships, co-parent and raise children.

Young parents in Logan bear exponential risk across multiple generations: they are often from highly disadvantaged backgrounds, they experience complex challenges as people and as parents, and their children are at significant risk of poor outcomes throughout life (Allen & Clarke, 2019; Hogan, 2017). Stress, stigma and social isolation sometimes associated with young parenthood can make young people less likely to engage in mainstream supports, meaning we need to think about services differently.

Research indicates that early motherhood is strongly associated with socioeconomic disadvantage. However, it is generally recognised as a symptom of disadvantage rather than the cause of it (Butler et al., 2010; Hoffmann, et al., 2019; Moore & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). Pre-existing disadvantages can be further compounded and entrenched by early parenthood, increasing the risk of poor housing, employment, health and social outcomes (Allen & Clarke, 2019; Collins, 2010).

Young people aged 12 to 24 are at higher risk of homelessness than any other age group in the country (AHURI, 2023). Young parents are particularly vulnerable to homelessness, due in part to the increased stressors and challenges they face when transitioning to parenthood. The current housing crisis has had a significant impact on housing options for young families. For example, a single parent with one child on full Centrelink entitlements including rent assistance has a rental affordability of $205-$275 per week (based on 30%-40% of their income).

There are currently zero properties available to rent in Woodridge and surrounding Logan suburbs in this price range.

Affordability challenges mean young parents often have to stay with family and friends for extended periods, a situation that is often unsafe and unsustainable for young parents and their children. Early experiences of homelessness are very damaging for children and can have a significant impact on children's physical and socio-emotional health and wellbeing and their cognitive development, and is associated with increased likelihood of child safety involvement (Dockery et al., 2013).

Cost of living pressures make employment critical for housing affordability. However, early parenthood can disrupt participation in education and employment, especially for teenage parents, and impact on their long-term education outcomes, employability and earning capacity (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Hoffmann et al., 2019). Childcare is also a significant barrier; often having limited or no informal childcare support, young parents can struggle to cover the cost of formal arrangements. Consequently, young parents face higher welfare dependency and increased likelihood of intergenerational transmission of disadvantage to their children (Ricks, 2016).

Furthermore, young parents often feel isolated and excluded (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). Their responsibilities as parents make it hard to spend time with friends and maintain friendships (Bouldon, 2010). Young parents may find they have less in common with their non-parenting peers and have limited opportunities to meet other young parents. As a result, they can miss out on socialising with peers, which is important for their own development as young people (Hoffmann et al., 2019). They can also find themselves with few people in their lives that they can really count on when they need support.

These stressors can exacerbate the risk of relationship violence and poor mental health. Young parents are at risk of family violence and relationship conflict due to factors including developmental stage and lack of relationship experience, vulnerabilities of young parenthood, complex trauma and insecure attachments (Allen & Clarke, 2019; Collins, 2010). The stress of young parenthood can bring relationship tension to the forefront as young people learn to navigate intimate relationships, co-parent and raise children. Disadvantage, trauma, lack of family support, isolation, relationship conflict, poor housing, and lack of employment can all contribute to poor mental health outcomes for young parents.

## Adolescence provides a critical window of opportunity

Despite the risks and challenges, there are also many opportunities when working with young families. For young parents, adolescence and early adulthood is a time of significant developmental transition that is considered to be second only to infancy in the magnitude of changes that occur in the brain (The Royal Australasian College of Physicians, n.d.).

Young parents are in their formative years as adults. The brain systems involved in processing information, evaluating risks, delaying gratification, and controlling behaviour are maturing (Price-Robertson, 2010). Young adulthood marks the beginning of more nuanced ways of thinking, especially in regard to complex social and ethical issues, increased organisational ability, strategic thinking, problem solving, decision making, planning ahead and visualising the future, self-reflection and impulse control.

During this period, young people also gain a more established sense of their own identity and understand the consequences of their behaviour. In general, this is accompanied by a shift towards greater autonomy, self-reliance and confidence (The Royal Australasian College of Physicians, n.d.).

However, cognitive and psycho-social development occurs at a variable rate. In some instances, young people living in adverse environments who experience major life events in a relatively short time can fast track into adulthood, as they are compelled by necessity to mature early (Butler et al., 2010). At the same time, young people who grew up in adversity, without a responsive parent, whose growing independence was inadequately supported, who missed out on early rich exploratory experiences and had limited success with schooling, may be ill prepared for adulthood (DeJong, 2003).

This period of brain development presents an opportunity to engage young parents around their goals and hopes for the future and equip them with the skills they will need to thrive. At the same time, the children of young parents are developing rapidly, providing a dual opportunity to invest in both generations.

## Engaging young parents

Stress, stigma and social isolation sometimes associated with young parenthood can make young people less likely to engage in mainstream supports, meaning we need to think about services differently.

Young mothers can experience high levels of 'shame, stigma and discrimination associated with perceptions of their 'fitness' to be a parent and moral judgement due to ageist attitudes' (Conn et al., 2018). They report feeling scrutinised, stereotyped as irresponsible, immature, welfare dependant, ignorant and incompetent, stigmatised and judged. They can receive 'dirty looks', unsolicited lectures on parenting or verbal abuse from strangers and negative responses from service providers (McArthur & Barry, 2013).

This can result in young parents feeling humiliated, undermined and pressured to prove themselves by demonstrating that they are not just good parents, but perfect parents. Living up to these perceived expectations can be exhausting, contributing to the heightened risk of depression amongst young mothers.

This stigmatisation can have a negative impact on how young parents, especially young mothers, feel about formal supports and can subsequently prevent them from accessing these services. This is often accompanied by other barriers that prohibit service uptake and engagement, including:

- perceptions that the services were intrusive or threatening
- practical barriers such as work, childcare or transport difficulties
- perceived lack of relevance or meeting needs
- feeling too burdened or overwhelmed to use the service
- misinterpretation of the service, concerns over confidentiality and lack of trust
- parental anxiety about being judged and feeling different or unwelcome due to class, race or cultural background
- low self-esteem and control issues
- fear of attracting child safety attention and involvement (Taylor et al., 2012).

Key strategies from research about what works in supporting young parents, include:

- intervening early
- specifically targeting interventions to young parents
- adopting non-stigmatising and strengths-based approaches
- addressing a variety of risk and protective factors
- involving the whole family
- including high degrees of support sustained over time
- providing individual support including home visiting
- working across agencies
- offering different ways to participate, including in groups and online
- focusing on improving outcomes for both parents and their children (Fletcher et al., 2013).

## The Thriving Young Families Integrated Service Model

The Thriving Young Families model is an interdisciplinary mixed-mode approach to supporting young parents in line with research about what works for young people in general and young parents in particular. It offers multiple entry points and service options tailored to young families.

The program is informed by key principles:

1. Relationships are the foundation and vehicle for change
2. Support is holistic and multifaceted, responding to whole-of family needs, at times multi-generational
3. Parents set the direction and pace of the work
4. There is an intentional focus on building the skills young parents need to succeed
5. Services and opportunities to engage with peer support are father-inclusive
6. Responses are tailored to the unique needs, circumstances and aspirations of each family.

Underpinning this approach is a strong understanding of the impact of intergenerational trauma and child and youth development.

Key components of the model include (see Figure 1.):

- **Family resourcing** – relationship-based coaching and case management providing young parents with comprehensive, long-term support to address immediate issues and build skills and aspirations
- **Housing** – intervening fast to get families housed and build their capacity to sustain housing in the long term
- **Safe relationships** – fostering respectful relationships skills and providing support when safety issues emerge
- **Employment and education** – linking young parents with education, employment and other activities to improve their work readiness
- **Therapeutic intervention/Counselling** – providing individual, family and group therapeutic activities to address trauma and build coping skills
- **Peer Support/Connections** – promoting informal support networks and developing peer mentoring strategies.

Thriving Young Families includes a dedicated position that works directly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and supports non-Indigenous staff in their work. This role enhances engagement and trust with young First Nations families.

The model was developed based on best practice research, stakeholder consultation and co-design with young parents.

An initial scoping of each component of the model was undertaken to review the existing evidence base, identify good practice elements and begin to frame objectives and strategies for achieving desired results.

Stakeholders were then engaged to refine the emerging model to enhance the intervention's fit with cohort and context. Discussions were held with existing Step by Step program staff, YFS content experts who specialise in one of the program component areas, external agencies who operate young parent programs and young parents themselves to explore experiences, ideas and insights.

A Young Parent Influencers reference group was established in October 2021, bringing together parents with lived experience of young parenthood to provide ongoing guidance as the initiative developed. YFS asked young parents initially what type of support they want.

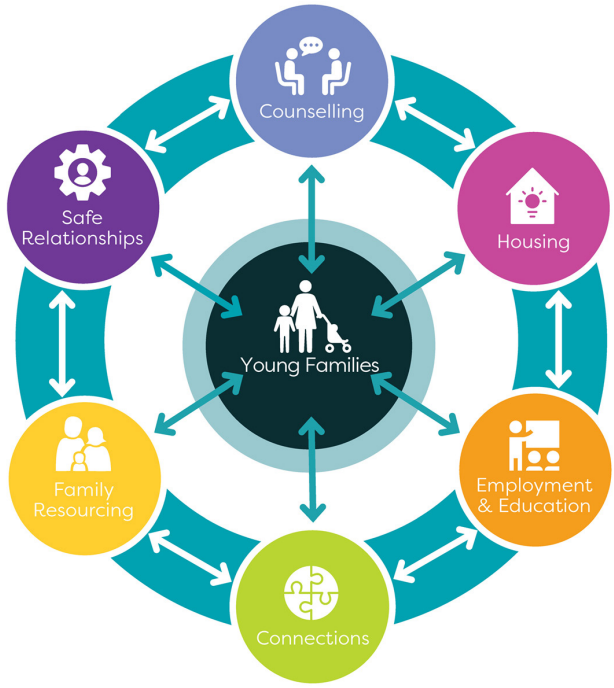



Figure 1: Step by Step Thriving Young Families Service Model

They said:

- support that is flexible and informal, including drop-in spaces
- services that are accessible and non-judgmental
- group activities and social events, including dad-specific groups
- a focus on self-care
- help to address barriers so they can participate in education and training
- engagement through social media.

Young Parent Influencers have continued to provide input into the model as it has evolved.

## Research methods

To support ongoing innovation and learning as the initiative evolved, a developmental evaluation approach was adopted (McDonald, 2023). This approach aimed to:

- collaborate with young parents and understand what works for them and their children to thrive
- inform ongoing, real-time, data-driven decision making and adaptation
- document the innovation process and adaptations as they unfold for transparency and transferability
- generate learnings and insights from the initiative.

The developmental evaluation was led by YFS' Research and Evaluation Manager with research and practice development support provided by Paul Testro Consultancy and Encompass Family and Community.

A mixed methods action learning approach was adopted, drawing on ongoing reflection from the project implementation team and practitioners, participant interviews and program data.

Encompass Family and Community engaged service users around their experiences with the program. They interviewed a small cohort of six participants in May and October 2022. Parents' feedback highlighted the benefits of an integrated approach and positive outcomes resulting from the service.

Program data was monitored routinely to understand performance areas for improvement. The program utilises two outcomes measurement tools:

- The Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI), a validated quality of life measure, which is completed by participants early in their involvement with the program and at the end of service.
- The Thriving Matrix – Young Parent edition, a bespoke tool custom developed by YFS to monitor families' progress along a ten-point continuum from 'in crisis' to 'thriving' across key aspects of young families' lives. As with the PWI, this is administered in a pre and post-test format, but is completed by practitioners based on conversations with families and their professional judgement.

The two tools are complementary and together provide a robust understanding of change for young families.

## Uptake and engagement

From July 2021 to February 2024, the program has worked with 200 young families, who have engaged with services in multiple ways:

- 120 families received individualised support from a family resourcing practitioner
- 74 families participated in a group program (peer support)
- 72 families engaged in counselling
- 53 families were supported by a housing and homelessness specialist
- 31 families engaged with the education and employment mentor (see Figure 2.).

Note the safe relationships component is not a distinct role, but is embedded as a priority within all roles.

Overall, 45% of families engaged with multiple components. This has increased over time as service offerings have evolved and young parents' trust in the service has increased.

Typically, young families engaged with family resourcing in the first instance. The majority of program participants entered the service through this pathway. Of these, more than 70% went on to engage with another component of the program.

Some young families only engaged with the peer support component of the program as they just wanted to connect informally with peers through the group activities and be linked in with services as needed.

Other young families only engaged with the Counsellor. These young participants were generally supported by another service and did not require further support from the program.

Due to the range of different offerings available this catered for young parents with differing needs, from those who required low level peer support, to those with a greater level of complexity, requiring a more intensive approach.

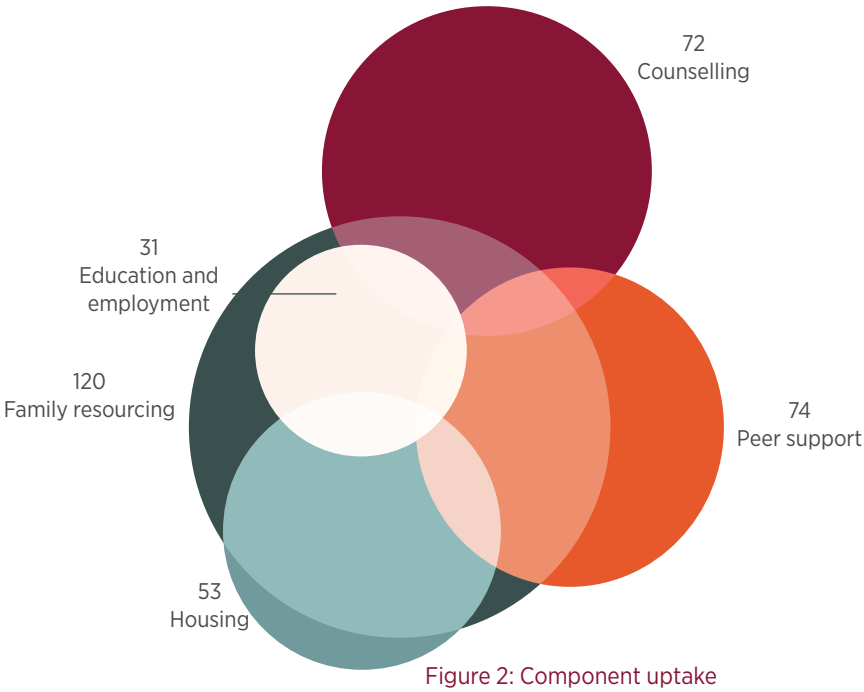



Figure 2: Component uptake

Building strong, consistent attendance and engagement with newer elements of the program such as group activities was challenging. This was in part due to barriers to attendance, limited referral pathways from universal health or education services, disruptions due to COVID 19 and local flooding, and young people entering into work or study. The program trialled alternative venues and times for group activities and pro-active engagement strategies through services, social media and community events to build up peer support activities. This took dedication and perseverance. This is now one of the most popular program components and often serves as an entry point into more intensive support or a tapering off option for young families that no longer need intensive support, but still want to stay connected with the program and peers they have met along the way.

Uptake of elements such as counselling and education and employment were also slow initially as many young parents were not ready. Non-traditional approaches to therapeutic support were explored such as adventure-based therapy and 'walk and talk' sessions. To improve uptake, the education and employment component focused more on mentoring and longer-term career planning than immediate outcomes. This approach helped young parents to explore and expand their ambitions and build the foundational skills needed to work towards and achieve their goals, setting them up for the future.

Promoting uptake of new elements added another layer of responsibility to the Family Resourcing role. Practitioners had to actively plant seeds and listen for interest in other program components whilst building relationships and responding to immediate needs.

## Program outcomes – Benefits for young families

Feedback from young parents and program data shows that program outcomes were positive and aligned with the Families and Children Activity outcomes framework (DSS, 2021). Young parents' experiences and outcomes as described here are exemplified through Sarah's story below.

### Outcomes area 1: Children and young people thrive

Participating young parents identified a range of positive changes in their lives since working with Thriving Young Families, which included improvements in mental health, coping skills, confidence, and wellbeing.

> *'We're in a better place now and I can do more stuff now because they've shown me how to deal with stuff better'.*

*'I'm not doubting myself anymore'.*

*'I'm pretty proud of myself'.*

*'I'm more happier'.*

Participants' observations are supported by program data, which demonstrates that 81% of participants who completed the program experienced positive improvements towards thriving.

Young parents' perception of their wellbeing increased from a total average Personal Wellbeing score of 64.5 to 75.9 (see Figure 3.). This brings their sense of wellbeing on par with Australian norms (ranging from 73.4 and 76.4). The largest improvements were in relation to future security and standard of living.

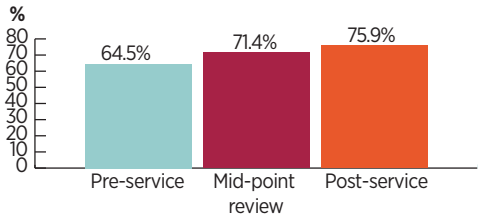



Figure 3: Personal Wellbeing Index – Average ratings pre and post service

### Outcomes area 2: Family relationships flourish

Young parents improved parenting practices and reported better relationships with their children, particularly for those who participated in group activities.

One young father described the benefits of learning about child development alongside other young fathers as part of the 'Young Dads' Squad':

*'Young Dads' Squad has helped me connect with other dads without being judged or feeling out of place. I've learnt more about how to read my children's behaviour and how to cope better with them.'*

One young mother described the benefits of participating in the 'Bump to Jump' playgroup for herself and her child:

*'Getting out of the house, connecting with other young mums and watching my daughter play with kids her own age.'*

### Outcomes area 3: Adults are empowered

Young parents felt empowered and more in control, partly because they were able to make decisions about how they engaged with the program. This sense of self-efficacy gave them a strong foundation and greater sense of possibility for the future.

*'you can say no and yeah, make a choice'.*

*'[They have] given [me] a better opportunity to be a successful person'.*

### Outcomes area 4: Communities are cohesive

Participating young families felt they were offered the right type and amount of support, at the right time. They felt the service was responsive and tailored to their needs.

*'[the service is] tailored to what you need'.*

*'I never have to wait long for support'.*

The range of resources available within the team meant that families did not have to be referred out, retell their story, or to go on a waitlist. This enhanced service accessibility.

*'[It is] better [getting support] at the same organisation because they can talk to each other and have different skills'.*

*'you get the help you need in one place.... it's exhausting getting help from different places'.*

## Case study: Sarah's story

Sarah's experience with the program exemplifies how one young mum engaged with the different service elements over time and the benefits for her and her children (name changed for privacy).

In early 2021 Sarah and her 3 children were temporarily staying with a friend after leaving a domestically violent relationship. Sarah's friend at the time was being supported by Step by Step. This was how Sarah made her first connection with a Family Resource Practitioner (FRP). With the primary focus being Sarah's homelessness, she was introduced to the team's Housing Specialist. Within 2 weeks of working with the FRP and Housing Specialist she moved into her own tenancy with her 3 children (note: this was prior to the current Queensland housing crisis). With the help of an external agency, Sarah moved into a fully furnished home. Sarah shared with program staff how she went from having nothing to having everything and how she was now able to start planning for her and the children's future.

Sarah continued to work with a FRP who supported her around budgeting, and safe and healthy relationships. They encouraged her to start thinking about employment. The FRP observed that Sarah would often make comments that she was not worthy, or a good mother and felt upset whenever anyone said otherwise. Sarah identified that she would like support to address her mental health and was linked into the team's Counsellor. Sarah was also linked into the team's Education and Employment Mentor who supported her to enrol in a course and commence studying.

Sarah spoke to the benefit of having all the support she needed from one organisation. Previously she had found it distressing trying to remember everyone from all the different organisations. She described YFS as 'my homestead'. Financially she benefited by only having to get to one location. Trying to work with multiple services is often overwhelming when they are all trying to book a time in with her. Sarah spoke about finding it hard to build trusting connections with people, so working with one place meant she was better able to build that connection and did not have to repeat her story,

'I was able to establish trust to grow and be able to get somewhere'.

Sarah took a break from the service for 6 months. She reached out to Step by Step again when the team started offering peer activities that would allow her to connect with other young mothers. Sarah said that she was alone and wanted to be around safe people. Due to her previous interaction with the Step by Step team, she knew the groups would not be filled with strangers and that she would be welcomed. After attending the 'Young Mums Squad', a space where young mums can get to know other young mums, Sarah felt more confident to attend other things, stating:

'I felt empowered and a sense of belonging'.

Sarah no longer formally accesses the program for support, instead she has become the one providing the support. Sarah along with several other young parents make up the Young Parent Influencers. As part of the Young Parent Influencers, Sarah consults, guides and collaborates with any Logan service who would like to benefit from their expertise and lived experience. Recently Sarah spoke at a fundraiser, using her story and experience to help bring awareness to the unique needs of young parents. Sarah is passionate about being able to provide support to others and use her experience to help empower others. Sarah identified that having a consistent service has allowed her to regain her trust with other people and services.

Sarah's story exemplifies a typical Step by Step Thriving Young Families model of care. However, the journey can look different for each participating young family as they choose how they engage with the program.



**Sarah and her three children left a domestically violent relationship and were staying with a friend temporarily.**

Family Resourcing

### Connection to Family Resource Practitioner (FRP)

Sarah connected with an FRP, who explored Sarah's needs and goals.

Housing

### Linkage with Housing Specialist

Sarah was linked with the Housing Specialist to address her immediate needs. Within two weeks Sarah and her children moved into their new home.

Employment & Education

### Linkage with the Employment and Education Mentor

Sarah was able to start planning for her and her children's future.

The FRP encouraged her to start thinking about employment and linked Sarah with the Employment and Education Mentor, who supported her to enrol in a course.

Safe relationships

### Support around safe and healthy relationships

The FRP supported Sarah around safe and healthy relationships.

Counselling

### Linkage with therapeutic support

The FRP linked Sarah with the Counsellor to support with mental health.

*Sarah achieved her goals and was thriving.*

*"I was able to establish trust to grow and be able to get somewhere".*

*"I felt empowered and a sense of belonging".*

Connections

### Connection to peer support

Sarah joined the peer activities to connect with other young mums.

Young Parent Influencers

### Empowering others through the Young Parent Influencers

Sarah joined the Young Parent Influencers to use her experience to help support and empower other young parents.



## Service integration in practice

Bringing the village together through integrated services boosts young parents' resources, skills and connections. It is what makes the model more than the sum of its parts.

Service integration aims to join up services to enhance client outcomes. It is often understood on a continuum from autonomy through to cooperation, coordination, collaboration and integration (Fine et al., 2005; QCOSS, 2013). What this looks like in practical terms can vary greatly depending on the types of services and agencies involved and specific client needs. While there is widespread agreement on the value of 'joined-up' services in response to well documented deficiencies within the fragmented service system, there is little consensus on how this should be achieved, and very little evidence documenting successful integration (Bland & Shallcross, 2015; Bond, 2010; Brackertz et al., 2016; Building Changes, 2012).

In the Thriving Young Families initiative, service integration requires working across disciplines to wrap support around a family in a way that effectively utilises the strengths of different disciplines to maximise benefits. Practitioners bring a range of expertise to the team. Each role provides a combination of direct work with families and indirect work with teammates to support families and each other and to reinforce program objectives. The direct work reflects the program components, while the indirect work is what holds the components together. That is, the components are the bricks, while the integration is the mortar of the model. Key aspects of the indirect work include:

- **Working with intent and noticing issues.** The team is united by a shared vision of what the program is trying to achieve. Team members approach their work holistically and with curiosity. Regardless of each worker's specific focus area, they engage with young parents as whole people and try to understand what might be going on for them, and where they might be able to benefit from another program component.
- **Increasing visibility,** promoting uptake and building engagement. Workers are attuned to the needs of young parents and, where relevant, facilitate engagement with other program elements. This includes letting young parents know about the other service elements and what they involve, identifying potential barriers to engagement, providing informal introductions, planting seeds of possibility and building motivation and readiness for participation. This is particularly helpful where young parents may be interested but feeling anxious about engaging with elements like counselling or employment.
- **Reinforcing key messages and skill building activities.** A core focus of the program is equipping young parents with the skills and resources to address adversity and manage any future bumps in the road. One worker may identify core resilience-based skills and strategies such as emotional regulation that other workers can pick up and reinforce through their interactions with that family. This strengthens the impact of skill building activities and helps families to build activities into daily routines and form healthy coping habits.
- **Sustaining outcomes through complementary support.** Program components have a different mix of duration and intensity. The focused roles offer short term support to address immediate circumstances, while the family resourcing role provides longer term, individualised support. These supports are complementary and enable tailoring of the intensity and type of support over time.
- **Providing specialist advice and training to the team.** Each worker brings specialist knowledge and experience to the team and acts as a resource to the group. They support each other's professional development through practice reflection, participation in family review meetings and case consultations, discipline-specific training (e.g. housing, mental health). Co-location enables regular informal relationship building, sharing and learning.

## Key factors to ensure program effectiveness

Transitioning from a traditional case management service to an integrated, multi-disciplinary service model was challenging. It required significant changes in practice over a 2-year period. During this time there was uncertainty and resistance to change. Research suggests that only about 20% of individuals within organisations may be ready to change (Aldridge et al., 2016). Some people will embrace the change and others will find it confronting (Prichard et al., 2010). No matter how noble the objective or how well designed the initiative is, resistance to change is a normal human response, especially in the early implementation stages where there is a lot of uncertainty. Practitioners need support to enhance their readiness and acceptance of change. This requires leadership, organisational commitment and sustained resourcing.

Specific strategies adopted to equip practitioners and ensure model effectiveness included:

### Training and development

To aid practice development for the new integrated approach, 6 initial developmental sessions were

held with staff between September 2021 and December 2021. These sessions served multiple purposes of refining the service model, securing buy-in to the integrated approach and familiarising practitioners with core concepts inherent in the model. Foundational training was then organised with the whole team, regardless of role, in each of the core components so that everyone had the same knowledge base from which to work. This enabled practitioners to understand the different roles within a multi-disciplinary team.

### Coaching and facilitated reflection

Facilitated reflection focused on incorporating new knowledge and skills acquired through training into practice. Five reflective coaching sessions were held throughout 2022 in order to:

- develop a shared understanding of goals and progress
- shape team identity and culture
- reflect on practice
- share ideas to refine service development
- explore, learn and process the experience as a team.

### Team building

Integrated practice is built on the team having shared vision and values, mutual respect, understanding and trust between practitioners (Andrews & Tarver, 2021). This can be enhanced through:

- focusing on common interests and shared goals
- approaching collaboration with a sense of curiosity and generosity
- being a responsive and reliable co-worker
- building informal interpersonal connections
- allowing time for regular communication and shared decision making
- engaging in collaborative learning though professional development, negotiation of roles and boundaries, and participation in team meetings, case reviews, reflective practice, debriefing and other feedback processes (Andrews & Tarver, 2021; Packard et al., 2013).

This foundation of understanding and trusting relationships between practitioners within a team enables them to focus on their area of expertise with confidence in the value-add brought by other disciplines.

### Co-location

To facilitate cross-pollination of knowledge and incidental learning, the expanded team moved to a larger office space so they could be co-located. This is a well-established strategy to enable service integration and more effective teamwork (Lalani, 2022).

### Information sharing

To further enable integrated work, changes were made to the client management system to facilitate information sharing within the team. This caused YFS to review and update its information sharing principles at an organisational level, requiring both a cultural shift in practice and changes to systems.

## Conclusion

So far, this transformative approach to supporting vulnerable young families has shown promising results. The process of getting the village together to boost young parents' resources, skills and connections has generated significant learning about both service integration and implementation. The road to results is not straightforward; it requires leadership and resourcing, and much of the time and effort involved in the development and implementation of innovative services goes unfunded and unacknowledged.

Benefits from the initiative and overall feedback from young people and practitioners indicate that although working in an integrated way can be hard, it is worth the effort. As young people, young parents have a diverse range of needs and goals for themselves and their children. Equipping them to thrive requires a multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary approach that sees them as whole people and works across generations for the best possible outcomes.

## Acknowledgement

YFS' integration efforts were made possible through philanthropic funding from Hand Heart Pocket, the Charity of Freemasons Queensland. Hand Heart Pocket funding added value to YFS' core Australian Government Family and Relationship Services funding, enabling us to add specialist workers to an existing team of Family Resource Practitioners. This opportunity to trial a new way of working has been invaluable.

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PRACTICE INSIGHTS

# Valuing Children's Voice After Separation

**Lucy Cook,** Founding Director, Penguin Parent Education Network

## Introduction

> *'There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.'*
> Nelson Mandela, Former President of South Africa

Parental separation and divorce are significant life events that can deeply impact children's wellbeing and development. Over time, processes and practices have been adopted by the family law sector to protect children, many with the goal of shielding children from the damaging effects of relationship breakdown. However, sometimes the desire to protect or shield children has resulted in silencing them. What we do not realise is that by ignoring children's voices, the damage is already done.

This paper describes how Penguin Parent Education Network gives children a voice within the context of its Children's Contact Service (CCS)[1], using trauma-informed practices that aim to reduce children's anxiety.

These practices are delivered via a child-centred 4-step process that focuses on valuing their voices and minimising trauma and anxiety surrounding a contact visit. Children often arrive at contact centres feeling disempowered, and untrusting of any adults (including Penguin supervisors) who are involved in their parents' family law matter, which can lead to a high level of anxiety. The Penguin Method addresses these presenting issues with the ultimate aim of reducing anxiety in the children prior to their first contact visit. This in turn reduces the parents' anxiety, thus setting all up for a confident and successful visit.

Over a period of 9 months, 21 families and 34 children participated in orientation that included the Penguin Method prior to starting contact visits. Penguin found that by following this process, children self-reported a significant reduction in anxiety from pre- to post-orientation. By following the Penguin Method we are setting the children up for success, setting the visit up for success and supporting both parents and children on their journey.

[1] Children's Contact Services provide a safe environment for children to have contact with parents and other family members that they do not live with.

## About Penguin

During my 26 years as an educator both in early childhood settings and schools, I saw my share of the impact of separation and divorce on children. When I moved to the Human Services setting in 2023, I assumed that my role would be principally supporting parents through the separation and divorce process and helping them to navigate co-parenting. I also assumed that my clients' children would be mainly those in early childhood (under 8 years of age).

Penguin Parent Education Network supports parents with education and resources to help them be the best parents they can be regardless of the circumstances. Located at Southport on the Gold Coast, children and their parents can visit together in a safe and supported environment. Being close to the Broadwater Parklands lends itself to a variety of excursions that can take place during supported visits once trust is established. A strengths-based approach at Penguin aims to upskill parents to assist them in achieving their goals. While all aspects of parenting are supported, it is Penguin's services for parents and children of separated families that are most highly sought after. Practitioners from the family law sector frequently refer clients to Penguin as a CCS, however any families in need of support are welcome to use the service. A demand for services that supported parents or children with additional needs saw Penguin complete a NDIS Provider Application in 2023 and they are awaiting certification. This was a natural fit with a strong background of educating and caring for children with additional needs. Penguin looks forward to introducing a range of activities such as sensory playgroups, to support parents and children with additional needs.

While I was new to Human Services and the Family Law Sector, I was not new to children and the consequences of failing to support them to have a sense of agency. A sense of agency is the ability to make choices and decisions, to influence events and to have an impact on one's world (Hilppö et al., 2016). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that all children have a right to be active participants in all matters affecting their lives (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Supporting children's agency is about providing an environment that enables them to have a voice and recognising that children have a right to make choices and decisions.

Following yet another encounter with a tween-aged ball of anger who felt unheard and lacking in control, I discovered that it was the children who needed my support. By helping them – and importantly, by giving them a voice through the Penguin method discussed below – I was able to then help their parents and reduce some of the impact of separation and divorce. Setting the child up for success helped to set the parents up for success, which resulted in better relationship building between parent and child.

## Where are the Rights of the Child?

There is a tension between protecting children from harm and ensuring their voices are heard in family law proceedings in Australia. There is an 'ingrained dichotomy between protection and participation' (Dimopolous, 2023, p.89). This is despite the Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CRC) outlining the rights of children to participate in decisions that affect them (CRC, 1989). For many years, concerns have been raised that judges are not fully considering children's rights when making decisions about parenting arrangements (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2011; Kaspiew et al., 2014). The research suggests that while there are legitimate concerns about child wellbeing, safety, and the potential for parental manipulation, children should have a meaningful voice in decisions about their lives (Dimopolous, 2023; Carson et al., 2018).

Overall, this research highlights the need to find a balance between protecting children and respecting their right to participate in decisions that affect them. The research further supports a child-inclusive approach, which gives children 'a bigger voice, more of the time' (Carson, 2018, p. ix).

Characteristics of an inclusive approach identified by children in the above research include professionals:

- providing space to speak and more effective listening to their views and experiences
- taking steps to build trust with the children and young people with whom they interact (including via qualities such as patience, empathy and respect)
- being more mindful of children and young people's needs
- engaging in open communication by providing more information relevant to the decision-making process in children and young people's cases
- acting protectively and addressing and responding to children and young people's concerns
- keeping children and young people informed about issues affecting them.

Penguin has embedded these characteristics in its child inclusive approach.

## Setting Up for Success: The Penguin Method

To implement a genuinely child-inclusive approach, it is paramount that services accord children due value and recognition. At Penguin, this ethos is epitomised through the adoption of a strengths-based perspective. Children undergoing the experiences of

separation and divorce are inherently vulnerable. Nonetheless, it is imperative to afford them a sense of agency, acknowledging their capacity as conscious and competent decision-makers. Within the framework of Penguin's approach, children are central. The realm of separation and divorce presents formidable challenges for children, often leaving them feeling unheard and devoid of control, as evidenced by their expressions during orientation visits. Integrating a framework that combines agency with a trauma-informed approach to service provision holds promise in mitigating the adverse impacts of stress and anxiety experienced by children in such circumstances. At Penguin this is considered in the following areas:

**Environment** – a sense of calm is created by providing a setting that has trauma-informed design. This involves soft furnishings, curved edges, lack of clutter, warmth and homeliness, a sense of familiarity, light (preferably a good amount of natural light), and the ability for service users to immerse themselves in, or connect with, nature such as a garden or outdoor play area. Nature play is vital as it allows the child to remain connected to their parent while having the ability to control the level of space between them. It can also help children develop resilience and support them in coping with the uncertainty and stress of family breakdown (Faber & Wittenborn, 2010).

**Intake** – each parent is required to participate in a separate intake process involving the completion of an intake form for themselves and each child. This provides Penguin with a comprehensive picture of the child, their likes and dislikes, their current routine and their relationship with each parent. Following this, parents are required to attend the centre for an interview. This is an integral part of the process as there are many preconceived ideas that parents have about contact centres – for example, that they are going to be like a jail with closed-in spaces and intense scrutiny. Visiting the centre and participating in the intake process where connections are made, concerns can be shared, and plans are put in place helps ensure the parent is ready to attend the visit confidently. Children are extremely perceptive and will pick up on a parent's anxiety, which can jeopardise the success of the visit. Consistency breeds calm. The younger the child, the more important it is that the visiting parent brings all the care items that the child needs and is used to, right down to the brand and type of nappies, sippy cup, and food. Penguin staff communicate this shopping list to the visiting parent well before the visit.

**Orientation** – the final step is for the child to have an orientation visit to the centre. The residential parent brings the child to visit and build an initial rapport with the supervisor. The children will learn where the bathroom is, what resources are available and where they are located, so they can confidently select activities to play with. From the outset, children are told that the 'kids rule' at Penguin. The goal is wherever possible to give them choice and a sense of agency.

The relevance of choice theory to the condition of children of separated parents is supported by research on childhood attachment. This research suggests unexpected separation or disconnection from loved ones can cause emotional distress for children and exacerbate dissatisfaction and unfulfilled needs (Edwards, 2009; Belsky & Pasco Fearon, 2002). In 1998, Glasser proposed that people's feelings (and physiological responses like fear and shaking) play a significant role in how they choose to behave to establish control over their environment (Johnson, 1989). Choice Theory may be seen as an empowering (strength-based) philosophy as it is the individual alone who may create the world they desire (Walter et al., 2008). It also acknowledges the significant power of the need for belonging. Children from separated parents may feel unwanted and a lack of belonging (Faber & Wittenborn, 2010).

Experiencing belonging is integral to human existence and helps define children's identities. It is a basic human need. As children, we all have an innate desire to form and maintain secure relationships with others through play, friendship, and the support of family members. Belonging develops a child's ability to build trust and confidence in others. When children feel that they belong, they are better able to:

- cultivate trusting relationships
- manage their emotions in healthy and adaptive ways
- know that they are important and valuable
- feel safe and secure
- feel confident and valued in their own identity
- understand that there are other children, adults and community members that care about them and are there for them when they need support (Department of Education, 2022).

Penguin supports a sense of belonging via their Penguin Plateau (belonging board). Children can choose whether they would like to create a fingerprint penguin on the board with their parent. They can personalise them and select a fictional name if they wish. Many allied practitioners who have visited Penguin have created a penguin on the plateau, demonstrating to children and parents that there is a supportive team around them.

## The Penguin Method – 4 Steps

During orientation, where children have the capacity, they take part in a floor activity that helps them identify factors concerning their visit to Penguin that are out of their control and those they can control. Penguin has been achieving success by using this method for nearly 12 months. Children are invited to contribute with markers on a large sheet of paper so they can co-construct the plan for their impending visit.

1. **Out of their control** (we call these non-negotiables) – for example, court-ordered items, the time, day, and duration they must see their non-residential parent, and how their parent will respond to them.

2. **In their control** – for example, what they play with, how long they play with a resource, where their parent should sit at the table, deciding whether to have a good day (how they show up on the day – think mindset), what their supervised parent should bring for them to eat within our healthy food policy, when they will eat, if they wish to take artwork home or give it to their parent or place it in the Penguin Art Gallery.

By clearly and visually identifying these factors, a child's sense of agency is strengthened. It also outlines from the outset the non-negotiables. Clarity brings calm. Once a rapport has been established and a level of trust built, the 'Worst Thing That Can Happen' game is played.

3. **The Worst Thing That Can Happen Game** – The child identifies the worst thing they believe could happen during a visit. This allows them to identify and articulate the main source of their anxiety. Once mentioned it can be managed. When parents are asked independently what concerns they think their children will raise, they often identify a parent absconding with the child, physical, verbal or emotional abuse or intimidation. However, the issues the children raise are quite different. They can include my parent will hug me, my parent will call me a nickname I don't like, my parent will talk about my other parent. These issues can be easy to manage, by discussing them with the parent before their first visit. These responses are another sign of children grasping for things they can control. Many of the items raised are then listed in their no-go topics (see step 4 below) or are covered within a safety plan. The safety plan ensures the children feel physically and emotionally safe. It may involve discussing the Penguin centre service agreement that parents and children adhere to and provisions that include not talking about the other parent's family, being respectful to each other including supervisors, or showing children where cameras are and reassuring them that parents agree that a supervisor will be with the children at all times. The children are also introduced to the code phrase 'Can I have a Penguin biscuit?' Each supervisor carries a Penguin biscuit in case there is a need for a child to access time out, reassurance or just to talk.

4. **No-go topics/actions** – Lastly, the children are encouraged to raise any topics or actions they do not want their supervised parent to broach or do. The Penguin service agreement requires parents to avoid discussing the other parent or 'adult' topics to do with the separation. We talk about remaining in the here and now, and not discussing uncertainties. The aim is to have fun and remain safe. Some children identify things that are painful for them such as past experiences. These are never questioned as to why but are always respected, further fostering a sense of agency. Examples of 'no-go' topics include the high school they are going to next year, their old pets, their mum's boyfriend, use of their nickname, etc. It is discussed with the children that these things can change over time. These may be their rules for now, but often, down the track, they bring up things when they are ready, and they know the supervisor is there to support them. When we are in the precariousness of the relationship rebuilding phase, this approach has been found to greatly reduce their anxiety and give children back some sense of control (sense of agency). The relevant information can then be relayed to the supervised parent, so they know what to avoid, what to bring and how to help set the visit up for success. Respecting their child helps to re-build trust.

## Outcomes of the Penguin Method

In the past 9 months, Penguin has completed this process with 21 families and 34 children ranging in age from 6-15. Penguin found that on average, children self-reported a reduction in anxiety from a rating of 9 or 10 out of a possible 10 before orientation (with 10 being extremely anxious), to 6 or 7 post orientation. Self-rating was then followed by a discussion with children about how it is natural to be anxious, especially before the first visit and even their parents may be anxious because they are all new to Penguin.

Quotes from parents following orientation (names withheld for privacy reasons):

> *'Thank you for having us for orientation, prior to coming to Penguin I had 2 panic attacks so it is certainly reassuring now to know the children are comfortable',* Parent A.

> *'I could see from Orientation you had <my child's> best interests at heart. I held off contact centres thinking they were awful and not something I wanted to subject <my child> to when in reality what a fun way to enable safe relationship building',* Parent B.

Quotes from Children following orientation (names withheld for privacy reasons):

> *'I am still nervous but now know Miss Lucy is there if I need',* Child A, 9 yrs.
>
> *'I was 100 but now I am negative 10',* Child B, 13 yrs.
>
> *'I like that kids rule at Penguin, I am sick of people telling me where to go and what to do',* Child C, 12 yrs.
>
> *'It's good that Mum is not going to try to hug me or ask me what high school I am going to next year',* Child D, 11 yrs.

Early outcomes indicate that by following the Penguin Method we are setting the children up for success, setting the visit up for success and supporting both parents and children on their journey.

## Lessons learnt

Several lessons were learnt along this journey. Firstly, there is a lower age limit to successful implementation of the Penguin Method than we originally anticipated. While it does depend on the developmental age of the child as well as their capacity to engage with the process, we found that typically developing children were able to participate from around 6 years of age.

Secondly, younger children in orientation are often excited and over-stimulated by the range and quantity of resources. It is still important to check in with these children, however, this is best done while the child is engaged in play and/or the supervisor is also playing parallel with the child. For example, we have taken 'butchers' paper outside with active children and completed the columns while they were swinging on the swing. We can also talk about a funny feeling in our tummy sometimes and how we can help. The danger is that you can create anxiety, where it did not previously exist, by asking too many questions or suggesting things they may be worried about, especially if the child does not have the emotional maturity to process this. It is important that the children understand the basics, the supervisor's role (to help them have fun and keep safe), that they are going to come back and play at Penguin and that their parent will be there.

Thirdly, it is important to ask the child if they prefer to have their residential parent there while we complete the paper exercise or not. One 12-year-old preferred Dad not to be in the room because she knew he worried about her, and she didn't want him to be reminded of the other parent's past behaviour that was causing her anxiety.

Fourthly, extra attention also needed to be given to children with additional needs. While their developmental and socio-emotional age and stage are important, they often needed other adjustments such as a column for "when I need time out I..." or "you can tell when I need time out because I..." or "you can help me when I feel overwhelmed by....".

Some children take a while to process this activity and may have things they want to add at home, or they may be too shy to contribute at the time. We offer to the child to take their worksheet home and their parent can text us if their child updates it. We also take a photo of it for our reference which is stored on the family record to ensure any supervisors that support the family are aware and maintain a high level of consistency.

## Conclusion

Parental separation and divorce can undoubtedly be distressing for children. Effective support interventions should be trauma-informed and child inclusive to mitigate the long-term impact on children's wellbeing and development. At Penguin, we see the Penguin Method as an effective approach to enabling the child agency and reducing the child's anxiety. We hope that in the future the broader family law system better upholds the rights of children through child inclusive practices. Our little people are amazing, they are tolerant, compassionate, and understanding when they are given the grace to be heard. When they are given a sense of agency, we can reduce the negative impact of divorce and separation.

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# Honouring their stories by learning for the future

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## Abstract

This paper reflects on a workshop – 'Coercive Control and Red Flags for Lethality' – designed by Centacare North Queensland for practitioners working in family and relationship services. This workshop introduces the voices of those who have been lost to violence to improve our capacity to assess for coercive control and risk of lethality in all areas of practice for the future. The 'Coercive Control and Red Flags for Lethality' workshop applies Stark's (2007) definition of coercive control and Monckton Smith's (2020) 8 Stages to Domestic Homicide to the stories of those who have lost their lives to domestic violence related homicide and suicide, as reported in the coroner's reports provided to Australian courts. The significance of non-lethal strangulation as a red flag for future lethality is introduced, and Dutton and Goodman's (2005) analysis of non-lethal strangulation is used to position the use of non-lethal strangulation as a powerful instrument for coercive control. The workshop uses small group work to provide the opportunity for professionals to share expertise and skills as they explore the stories of lives lost and apply the models of Stark (2007) and Monckton Smith (2020) to identify the presence of coercive control and track the journey of the person using violence from intent to control to intent to kill. It uses intersectionality to introduce the concept of added vulnerability and to identify potential unintended consequences arising from the planned Queensland legislation to criminalise coercive control. The case for a common definition of coercive control and risk of lethality is argued. Feedback received from participants has demonstrated that practitioners continue to be unsure about what is coercive control and are unsure about how to use questioning skills to "reach deeper" in their assessment process. The coroner's findings in the case of Hannah Clarke and her children present a strong argument for a need to further develop practitioners' questioning skills in assessment of risk.

## Introduction

This paper describes the context in which Centacare North Queensland developed a workshop – 'Coercive Control and Red Flags for Lethality' – for practitioners working in family and relationship services and explores how the Workshop contributes to strengthening the family and relationship services sector's response to violence against women and children.

## Background

Violence against women and children has increased to epidemic proportions in Australia (DSS, 2022). From March 2021 to May 2022, approximately 3.8 million Australian adults (20% of the population) had experienced physical and/or sexual family and domestic violence since the age of 15 (ABS, 2023c) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience even higher rates of domestic and family violence due to the intersection of gender and racial inequality (Wendt et al. 2018). When The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (The Plan) 2022-2032 was drafted, a woman was killed by an intimate partner every 10 days (DSS, 2022). By the end of 2023 the number of women who died from domestic and family violence was 64. By 22nd February 2024, 12 Australian women had already lost their lives, an increase on the death rates for 2023. Police Commissioner Katarina Carroll was quoted as saying "to have in one year, a 25 percent increase in domestic violence is unheard of – that is one year" and Red Rose Foundation Chief Executive Betty Taylor claimed that the latest statistics are "the worst I have ever seen" (Red Rose Foundation National Symposium Brisbane, 2024). The Plan 2022-2032 had already named the building of "sector and community capacity to identify and support women and children at increased risk of experiencing gender-based violence and to intervene early to stop violence from escalating" as a primary goal (DSS, 2022) and the rising number of deaths due to domestic homicide adds urgency to this goal.

### How do we define domestic and family violence (DVF)?

The Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act (2012) defines domestic and family violence as occurring "when one person in an intimate personal, family or informal carer relationship uses violence or abuse to maintain power and control over the other person" (Queensland Government, 2016). The legislation defines a relationship as an intimate personal relationship as including married and defacto partners, parents of a child, people who are or were engaged, people who are in couple relationships including same sex relationships. Family relationships are defined as a relationship by either blood or marriage and includes extended or kinship relationships where a person is considered a relative. Also included under legislation are informal caring relationships where a person is dependent upon another person for support with essential tasks such as meal preparation and the care is provided outside of a commercial arrangement. Under Queensland law violence includes behaviour that is aimed at controlling or dominating another person through fear, abuse, threats, and coercion. Specific behaviours named in the legislation include physical, emotional, and sexual assault, financial control, social isolation, harm and threats of harming pets, harm and threats to harm others, monitoring the person's movements and stalking, including through the use of technology (Queensland Government, 2016).

### Coercive Control

Evan Stark (2007) introduced coercive control into the narrative of domestic and family violence in 2007, describing coercive control as "a course of calculated, malevolent conduct deployed almost exclusively by men to dominate individual women" (Stark, 2007). Coercive control has been described as "a pattern of behaviours within intimate relationships that results in the micro-regulation of the lives of victim–survivors" (Stark & Hester, 2019) that is motivated by a perpetrator's desire to dominate and control, physically, economically, socially, and emotionally (Boxall & Morgan, 2021). ANROWS (2023) describe coercive control as "the overarching context in which domestic and family violence occurs as distinct from a tactic used to perpetrate domestic and family violence."

What makes coercive control so insidious is the relentless assault on the victim's dignity, liberty, and self-efficacy (Stark, 2007). Perpetrators utilise strategies that include physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, financial, and systems abuse, social isolation, deprivation of liberty, intimidation, technology-facilitated abuse, and harassment (ANROWS, 2023), harm and threatens to harm others, including animals, and self (Boxall & Morgan 2021). While these are recognisable behaviours that form a pattern of coercive control, there are other behaviours that might appear innocuous to an observer yet instil fear and exert control over the victim (Boxall & Morgan 2021), meaning that to understand the impact of coercive controlling behaviours on the victim, these behaviours must be viewed within the context of the relationship (Dragiewicz et al. 2018, cited in Boxall & Morgan, 2021). The NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team (NSW DVDRT) (2020) found that while many domestic homicides were not preceded by evidence of physical violence, there was evidence of other forms of coercive control (NSW DVRT, 2020). The Plan 2022-2032 cites findings of the NSW Coroner's Court that 99% of domestic and family violence homicides happened within a relationship where the perpetrator was using coercive control over the victim (DSS, 2022). While coercive control does not always involve physical violence, physical violence is a common factor in the lead up to homicide (Parliament of NSW, 2021). MacDonald (2024) identified that there are limitations to the

current evidence base about coercive control due to the limited amount of research being done in this area and the small percentage of research specific to the Australian context. Available evidence provided limited information on the relationship between intersectionality and coercive control. MacDonald concluded that there is no shared agreement about how coercive control should be conceptualised (MacDonald, 2024). The need for a shared definition of coercive control is critically important with the introduction of legislation to criminalise coercive control in Queensland (Queensland Parliament, 2024), and the risk of misidentification of the primary aggressor.

### Non-lethal strangulation

Strangulation is an extremely effective way for a perpetrator to gain and maintain control (Thomas et al. 2014). The ability to restrict blood flow and take away her ability to breathe shows the victim the ease with which he can take away her life. Dutton & Goodman's (2005) definition of coercive control as "a dynamic process linking a demand with a credible threatened negative consequence for noncompliance" explains how strangulation serves as a powerful threat. First the perpetrator 'sets the stage' by creating the expectation of a negative consequence for noncompliance, then there is surveillance to monitor compliance, and finally the follow-through with the threat of a negative consequence, such as strangulation (Dutton & Goodman, 2005). The 2015 Not Now, Not Ever Report identified non-fatal strangulation within the context of domestic and family violence as a clear predictive indicator of an escalation in violence and a significant risk factor for homicide (Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland, 2015) with the chance of homicide increasing by 800 % after the first incident of strangulation (Strack & Gwin, 2011).

### Monckton Smith's 8 stage relationship progression to homicide

Monckton Smith (2018) published the results from her review of 575 domestic homicides in the UK, using the Counting Dead Women data base (Ingala Smith 2018) and developed an 8-stage timeline of events leading up to homicide (Verney, 2020). Monckton Smith applied Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to the two competing discourses about the motivation for domestic homicide. Foucauldian Discourse Analysis poses the question 'who holds enough power to position their perspective as the truth?' This power can be gained through the endorsement of institutions such as medical, legal, political and educational institutions, and when a critical number of these institutions agree upon this perspective as truth a discursive formation is born. Once a dominant discourse is established all opposing perspectives are viewed as resistance to it. Coercive control discourse was born from feminist scholarship and regarded as resistance to the dominant discourse of domestic homicide as a crime of passion. The dominant discourse is that domestic homicide is a crime of passion, occurring as an impulsive act of violence in response to proximal provocation. The discourse that emerged from the research and underpinned the 8-stage model of domestic homicide is a discourse of coercive control, where domestic homicide is the final stage of a predictable pattern of behaviour that maps the shift in intention from intent to control to intent to kill. A pattern of behaviour that is not only recognisable and predictable but also interruptible (Monckton Smith, 2018). This model offers the hope of early intervention, as opposed to the 'crime of passion' discourse that has neglected the overarching context of coercive control as a pattern of behaviours (Stark, 2012).

### Identified gaps in training provided to non-specialist family and relationship services practitioners compared to training provided to specialist domestic and family violence practitioners.

The Strategy 2016-2026 identified "educating frontline professionals to help them recognise and respond to DFV" as a priority (Queensland Health, 2022). Australian social workers surveyed in 2021 reported feeling inadequately prepared to intervene in DFV situations (Hempel, 2022). Mandara et al. (2023) found that one third of workers having initial contact with clients impacted by DFV do not have the skills to effectively engage these clients with early intervention support. Results showed that the response was largely procedural such as making referrals to other services, such as specialist DFV services, legal services, police, and providing information about safety apps and websites for safety planning. Overall, Mandura et al.'s (2023) study found that worker skills of risk assessment and safety planning were lacking (Mandura et al. 2023). In the US, Karakurt (2013) found that therapists often failed to screen for DFV and were unfamiliar with typologies, failing to recognise the indicators of coercive control and intimate partner terrorism that exclude couple work (Karakurt et al. 2013). The significant difference between the capacity of specialist DFV professionals and non-specialist workers to respond to DFV has been identified as a gap in training (DSS, 2022). These identified gaps in training for non-specialist workers require a model of workforce development that is strategic and evidence-based (Wendt et al. 2018). It is important for workers to understand the impact of intersectionality, defined as "multiple and intersecting structural and systemic

forms of discrimination, such as racism, colonialism, ableism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia and ageism" which increase the "prevalence, dynamics and severity of violence against women" (DSS, 2022). Without an understanding of intersectionality, a secondary form of inequality is created for victims (Payne & Triplett 2009).

### What has been proven to improve professional capacity to identify and respond to domestic and family violence?

There is little research available on the effectiveness of DFV training on the practice of case managers, mental health workers, marriage and family therapists, and social workers (Preciado, 2018). Available research does support the benefit of specialised DFV training. Supportive attitudes and beliefs about victims of DFV, combined with an understanding of theory and models of DFV and appropriate interventions are associated with positive outcomes for clients. Social workers who completed DFV training scored lower on negative attitudes and beliefs about victims of DFV compared to a control group who did not complete this training (Straatman et al. 2015). US research into the effectiveness of brief DFV training for workers managing applications for welfare benefits by victims of DFV found that workers who completed the training reported increased ability to recognise signs of DFV, and stated that they would be more likely to complete risk assessment and safety planning (Saunders et al. 2006) in (Preciado, 2018). Payne and Triplett (2019) suggest that worker appreciation of the importance of understanding the theory underpinning working effectively with DFV can be raised by including specific examples of the application of theory to practice in DFV trainings (Payne & Triplett 2009). Early intervention with DFV is reliant upon further knowledge and skills development for those non-specialist workers who provide frontline responses (Mandara et al. 2023).

### How does the 'Coercive Control and Red Flags for Lethality' Workshop contribute to the strengthening of the family and relationships services sector response to violence against women and children?

Early intervention is identified as a key feature of the holistic approach recommended in The Plan 2022-2032 and has been identified as one of the least developed areas of DFV prevention (DSS, 2022). The family and relationships services sector are in a prime position to meet The Plan's Early Intervention Objective 3, to "improve timely responses to newly identified cases of violence, attitudes and behaviors that may lead to violence perpetration" (DSS, 2022), and the 'Coercive Control and Red Flags for Lethality' Workshop addresses Early Intervention Objective 5, to "build sector and community capacity to identify and support women and children at increased risk of experiencing gender-based violence and to intervene early to stop violence from escalating" (DSS, 2022). The 'Coercive Control and Red Flags for Lethality' Workshop provides an experiential educational opportunity for workers within the family and relationships sector to recognise 'red flags' for tactics used by perpetrators to maintain coercive control over their partners, and to be able to intervene in a timely and effective manner to increase safety for women and children and prevent violence from escalating.

### How I introduced the voices of those who have been lost

The voices of those who have been lost were introduced through the inclusion of coroners' reports, de-identified case studies sourced from reviews into domestic violence deaths, and video footage from media and police body camera. A major limitation of this workshop has been the lack of suitable source material that documents the life and death of femicide victims from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and other marginalised groups.

### Target audience of the Coercive Control and Red Flags for Lethality Workshop

The target audience of the Coercive Control and Red Flags for Lethality Workshop are family and relationship service practitioners who have contact with people experiencing or using domestic and family violence. While most participants were not from a specialist domestic and family violence service, all were frontline responders to domestic and family violence within their role. The workshop was delivered at Townsville and Mount Isa and participants included significant representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers.

### Learning Objectives of the Workshop

The learning objectives of the model include:

- understand your organisation's policy regarding risk assessment and duty of care
- understand coercive control
- identify coercive control in a relationship
- understand strangulation as a tool of coercive control and the risk of lethality
- recognise patterns of perpetrator behaviour that indicate progress towards domestic homicide.

## Theory and Models Used

Participants were introduced to material from Alliance for Hope International to develop knowledge of non-lethal strangulation as a powerful instrument of coercive control and highly predictive of future homicide. This material was used to develop assessment skills for recognising when a client may have experienced non-fatal strangulation through observation of client behaviour and appearance. Group activities using this material were used to develop skills in the sensitive use of questioning to explore this with clients. The importance of encouraging and supporting clients to seek medical attention after non-fatal strangulation was highlighted using a video of Dr Bill Smock presenting case studies of patients who had experienced non-fatal strangulation at an Alliance For Hope Conference in 2020.

A large group exercise in the identification of tactics of coercive control and determination of the primary aggressor used YouTube footage from the police body cam recorded during the interaction between Utah Police and Gabby Petito and her fiancée Brian Laundrie on 12 August 2021 as a primary resource. This now infamous footage shows the couple when they were pulled over at the roadside in Utah after a report of a man slapping a young woman from a passing motorist. During the interaction police misidentify Gabby as the primary aggressor and eventually decide to record the incident as a mental health episode and separate the couple for the night. Several weeks later Gabby was found dead after her parents reported her missing. The coroner's report was that she died from strangulation. Brian was found dead from suicide several months later (Strack et al. 2023). Participants viewed the footage, noting indicators of coercive control in the behaviour and presentation of both Gabby and Brian, and their observations were then shared in a group discussion.

Theory of intersectionality is next introduced to participants to facilitate recognition that "violence and gender inequality exist in relation to multiple and intersecting structural and systemic forms of discrimination, such as racism, colonialism, ableism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia and ageism" (DSS, 2022). Workshops have been held in North Queensland and Northwestern Queensland, regions with high populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. The understanding of the impact of intersectionality upon the vulnerability of the client demographic, specifically the intersectionality of gender inequality and racism upon clients is important for the ongoing professional education of this workforce (Wendt et al. 2018). Finally, participants are introduced to Monckton Smith's 8 stages towards homicide to both consolidate the concept of coercive control being a pattern of violence with the intent to control and provide a framework for assessing risk of lethality and the opportunity to intervene to avert a homicide.

I chose to use Monckton Smith's (2018) 8 stages to femicide model because the stages provide a useful tool for professionals to apply alongside their existing knowledge of DFV and risk assessment skills and models to raise 'red flags' about the possibility of domestic homicide. Monckton Smith (2018) states that this 8-stage model is intended to provide a non-clinical risk assessment tool for frontline responders such as police (Monckton Smith, 2018) and this tool will be useful for all frontline responders in Australia, especially those who are not specialist DFV professionals. The 8-stage model assists workers with their assessment of risk and provides an evidence-based tool for documentation of decision making about when to refer to the High-Risk Teams and Queensland Police. For workers who are working with perpetrators, understanding the 8 stages to femicide will provide an evidence-based model with which to monitor the shifting attitudes and thinking of the men that they are working with, providing the opportunity for early intervention and safety planning. The temporal sequencing of the progression from early to later stages assists the worker to understand the motivation to kill and identify opportunities at each stage to avert the progression to domestic homicide (Monckton Smith, 2018).

Dutton and Goodman's (2005) model of coercive control is used in small group work where participants are invited to identify the 3 stages of maintaining coercive control in case studies. These case studies honour the stories of women who have lost their lives by providing the opportunity for participants to learn for the future to prevent the further loss of life. Case studies are drawn from coroners' reports, and case examples from the Review of domestic violence deaths involving fatal and non-fatal strangulation in Queensland (Sharman et al. 2021) and the NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team. Stark's (2007) definition of coercive control and the recent ANROWS (2021) policy brief 'defining and responding to coercive control were used to provide participants with foundational knowledge and a working definition of coercive control. This included an understanding of coercive control as "the overarching context in which domestic and family violence occurs as distinct from a tactic used to perpetrate domestic and family violence" (ANROWS, 2023). This distinction is critical for the development of assessment skills in determining whether the worker is responding to a single incident of violence rather than one part of an ongoing pattern of coercive control.

A later small group activity brings together the learnings from Dutton and Goodman's 2005 model of coercive control and Monckton Smith's 8-stages to femicide model and applies them

to The Queensland Coroner's Court report into the deaths of Hannah Clarke, Rowan Baxter, and their 3 children. Small group members work collaboratively to retrospectively map the progression of Rowan Baxter's use of strategies of coercive control during the "attempting to control" stage of Monckton Smith's 8 stages to the eventual domestic homicide. The aim of this exercise is to develop worker capacity to identify high risk and respond appropriately, honouring Hannah's memory by saving lives.

### Risk Assessment and Safety Planning.

The risk assessment and safety planning exercises included in the workshop are based on levels one and two of the Queensland Government's Domestic and Family Violence Common Risk and Safety Framework (CRASF). The CRASF underpins the Queensland Government's approach to delivering integrated service responses to domestic and family violence and the CRASF was chosen as the 'Coercive Control and Red Flags for Lethality' Workshop is delivered in North Queensland. The Level one tool is designed to be used by community members such as teachers, as well as professionals who encounter domestic and family violence in their roles. The Level two tool is designed for specialist DFV practitioners, selected government workers, and other professionals whose role involves responding to domestic and family violence. The Level three tool was not referenced as this is designed specifically for high-risk multi-agency teams (Queensland Government, 2023).

### Mode of workshop delivery

I have chosen to deliver 'Coercive Control and Red Flags for Lethality' as a face-to-face workshop for several reasons. Firstly, the face-to-face modality allows for connection and collaboration between participants, something that is especially valued by remote and rural workers. Hudson et al. (2019) found a strong demand for ongoing professional education amongst practitioners and managers in regional Australia, with a stated preference for face-to-face. Managers surveyed reported that their workers demonstrated increased engagement with material delivered when the training was face-to-face. Workers identified that the interpersonal interaction that occurs with face-to-face training provided them with the opportunity for professional networking. Workers also identified that face-to-face training provided the opportunity to ask questions and have in depth discussions that enabled them to gain clarification and a deeper and more expansive knowledge of the subject matter (Hudson et al. 2019). There is broad recognition that multi-agency collaborations and integrated responses are "best practice" for responding to DFV and preventing fatality (Wendt et al. 2018). Short trainings of 4 hours to a maximum of 2 full days were preferred by workers (Hudson et al. 2019). One full day, being 6 hours of workshop with an hour to account for breaks, was chosen for the 'Coercive Control and Red Flags for Lethality' Workshop as this timeframe provided adequate time to present all relevant information and was acceptable to most managers whose staff would be unavailable for client work during that time.

### Rationale for Small Group Work

Research has shown a preference for face-to-face training due to the opportunity for knowledge sharing, deeper discussions of subject matter, networking opportunities and the opportunity to ask questions directly with the trainer (Hudson et al. 2019). This was replicated by feedback from participants in response to the question "what did you find the most useful?" with comments such as "interaction was great", "interactive mode of the workshop", "plenty of opportunity for discussion", "lots of talking", "group collaborations", and "dissecting case studies". These outcomes were achieved by enabling the participants to work together in small groups of 4 to 6, seated around tables with space to share and discuss resources.

### Rationale for use of primary resource materials.

The use of primary resources offers access to diverse perspectives, and the opportunity to understand the complexity of intersectionality in the stories of those who have been lost. The evaluation of primary sources such as coroners' reports encourages collective reflection, and the application of critical thinking skills (Cayley, 2021). The following primary resources have been used in the 'Coercive Control and Red Flags for Lethality' Workshop.

- Fox 13 Tampa Bay Gabby Petito case: full Utah bodycam video. https://www.fox13news.com/news/utah-p...
- Dr Bill Smock (2020) Strangulation: what we learned in 2018. Alliance For Hope Webinar 2020.
- Queensland Government. Domestic and Family violence Death Review and Advisory Board. Domestic and family violence death of 'Frank'. 2017.
- Queensland Courts. Coroners Court of Queensland. Report from the Domestic and Family Violence Death Review Unit. Findings of inquest into the death of Hannah Ashlie Clarke, Aaliyah Anne Baxter, Laianah Grace Baxter, Trey Rowan Charles Baxter, and Rowan Charles Baxter. Southport. 29th June 2022. Findings of Jane Bentley, Deputy State Coroner.
- The Coroners Court at Darwin in the Northern Territory of Australia No. D34/2020 In the matter of an Inquest into the death of **HD (name suppressed) On: 5 MARCH 2020 At: Palmerston Findings** Judge Greg Cavanagh

- NSW Government. NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team Report 20192021. 02 Case review summaries. Case review 3959.

### The introduction of legislation to criminalise coercive control in Queensland and the importance of worker understanding of intersectionality to avoid secondary victimisation and misidentification of victims as the primary aggressor

As Payne and Triplett (2019) tell us, failure to educate workers about intersectionality can result in secondary inequality for victims and further disempower them (Payne & Triplett, 2019). ANROWS has identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women as being at high risk of misidentification as the primary aggressor due to intersectionality (ANROWS, 2023). It is important that workers can recognise the primary aggressor and understand typologies, to avoid the criminalisation of victims who are defending themselves. Australian research has been consistent with international studies that show that 50% of female violence is either self-defensive or retaliatory violence, of the violent resistance typology. Violent resistance was also found to be more common in incidents involving Aboriginal women. These findings highlight the different motivation behind female perpetrated domestic violence, which is rarely coercive control, and the importance of workers understanding the complexity of DFV (Boxall, 2020). Fear of their partner or themselves being incarcerated can also act as a powerful deterrent for some victims seeking help. Aboriginal women know that incarceration is dangerous for Aboriginal men and have a reasonable fear that they will be arrested and incarcerated themselves, leaving them and their children vulnerable and in danger. Other women who are drug or alcohol dependent might fear that involvement of the authorities will result in their children being removed by Child Safety (Sharman et al. 2021). These factors strengthen the argument for a common definition of coercive control.

## Evaluation

The systemic evaluation of training programs is important to assess the impact upon the effectiveness of service delivery in domestic and family violence. A limitation of this review of the 'Coercive Control and Red Flags for Lethality' is that feedback was provided by participants immediately after workshops before the opportunity to apply to practice. A total of 83 feedback forms were reviewed, 53 of these were from a previous version of the Workshop before the inclusion of Monckton Smith's 8-stages model. Of the 53 feedback forms from the Monckton Smith inclusive workshops, 11 participants identified the 8-stage model as the most useful part of the Workshop. Of the total of 83 feedback forms, the most useful part of the training was identified as follows: 32 named learning about non-lethal strangulation, 28 named being able to use case studies and reports, 20 named knowledge about coercive control, 17 named the group work, 10 named being able to practice skills, and 4 named the video footage exercise. During 2023, a total of 40 feedback forms were received and 28 participants reported that there was nothing that was not useful about the workshop and recommended no changes, 3 stated that there was too much focus on strangulation because they had already completed a strangulation awareness workshop, and 4 requested a domestic violence specific risk assessment and safety planning template for Centacare North Queensland. In response to the 2023 requests for a domestic and family violence specific risk assessment form, Centacare North Queensland formed a working group to draft this document for implementation in early 2024.

### Contribution of my findings to the ongoing professional education of workers who have contact with victims and users of domestic and family violence

Feedback received from participants has demonstrated that practitioners continue to be unclear about defining coercive control and are unconfident and lacking skills in how to "reach deeper" in their assessment process. The coroner's findings in the case of Hannah Clarke and her children present a strong argument for a need to further develop worker questioning skills during all stages of intervention and particularly in the initial risk assessment to improve rates of early identification of risk. After completion of the exercise of reviewing the coroner's report into the death of Hannah Clarke, participants were able to identify missed opportunities for further intervention and safety planning with both Hannah and Rowan Baxter. The further development of the questioning skills of the frontline workforce is in alignment with the coroner's recommendation for the consideration of whether there are opportunities to prevent future deaths from occurring in similar circumstances as those of Hannah and Rowan and their children (QLD Coroners Court, 2022). The findings of my review of the effectiveness of the 'Coercive Control and Red Flags for Lethality' Workshop will contribute to the ongoing professional education of workers who have contact with victims and users of domestic and family violence by identifying effective ways to engage workers in learning, increasing shared knowledge and collaboration across services, to track and improve our capacity to assess for coercive control and risk of lethality, and to track the journey of the person using violence from intent to control to intent to kill.

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PRACTICE INSIGHTS

# The more preparation the better

## A model for enhancing the Property Mediation experience

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## Abstract

Property mediation can be a complex and emotional step for separating couples. At Better Place Australia we have enhanced our process to support our clients to be better prepared for mediation. This paper discusses the property mediation process at Better Place Australia and how an additional step of a 1:1 session as part of the mediation process is of significant benefit to the parties. These benefits include time to speak out about things that are bothering them and then decide whether or how they want to say them in the joint/shuttle session, time to identify issues and topics to speak to a lawyer or accountant about, and assistance with preparing for the joint/shuttle mediation. Overall, participants are presenting at the joint/shuttle session in a more considered and prepared way.

## Introduction

One of the key aspects of separating from your partner/spouse is to separate the assets and liabilities that have been obtained through the relationship. Some sort it out between themselves (but this can be problematic if they do not legally formalise their agreement, and their former partner comes back asking for more money.) Many people need assistance in dividing their asset pool as it is an important but difficult conversation to have. The laws behind how assets and liabilities get divided are not simple, and a formulaic approach is not taken.

## Basics of the Property Process

To understand the adjustment in practice that Better Place Australia has introduced, it is useful (for the purposes of non-property mediators) to step through the basics of a property mediation. Some of this will be basic information for those who have trodden this path many times before.

The key important parts of property mediation are the following:

- Engagement of parties
- Assessment of the situation
- Decisions around suitability
- Property mediation.

Property mediation consists of four parts:

- Assets and Liabilities List
- Contributions (see s 79 below)
- Future Needs (see s 75 below)
- Proposals and agreements.

These principles are based on the requirements of the Family Law Act 1975 (Cth). It is important to be mindful of the following sections of the Family Law Act in relationship to property settlement.

Section 79 of the Family Law Act states what needs to be considered in making an order regarding the property interests of the parties. The relevant subsections are summarised below:

- Subsection 2 – Property settlements under the Family Law Act need to be just and equitable.
- Subsection 4 – The consideration in a property settlement (contributions sections) are:
    - Direct and indirect financial contributions
    - Direct and indirect non-financial contributions
    - Contributions made to the welfare of the family
    - The effects of the split on the earning capacity of either party
    - Considerations of future needs (in s 75(2), see below)
    - The effects of any other Family Law order
    - Any child support under the Child Support Legislation.

As we can see in the above considerations, s 75(2) is also considered in a property split. This subsection is known as the future needs considerations and covers issues such as:

- Age and state of health of each of the parties
- Financial resources and capacity of each party for gainful employment
- The need to care for children, themselves, other people they have a duty to support (and the financial situation of any cohabitation)
- A standard of living that is reasonable in the circumstances
- The potential of the split to assist increase income earning capacity (e.g., study, training, business)
- Impact on credits
- The need to protect a party's role as a parent.

## Rationale for the Process

As can be observed from the above, property settlement is a complicated process. Many times, parties may have had conversations about what they think their split should be, but at that time they were not fully informed about the principles underlying those decisions. It is particularly important to get legal advice about your property settlement as many people find out they were entitled to more than they realised. In addition, it is especially important to be informed about the ways to formalise the agreement. It is very risky to make an agreement without legally formalising it, as former partners can come back asking for more money.

It is important to support clients to have conversations informed by legal advice about the issues raised by the principles under the Family Law Act. The advantage of mediation is that parties can retain the conversation between themselves, while using the lawyer as a consultant to inform their negotiations and decisions. A property mediator is skilled at keeping the process on track and maintaining the boundaries to ensure the conversation is useful.

The catalyst for the enhanced process was seeing a need to better support victims of family violence where assessed it was appropriate and safe to continue. By providing a 1:1 appointment, this allowed for the extra supports that were of assistance and allowed mediation to continue in a careful and considered way that took into account safety and preparation while allowing it to progress.

Given the complexity of these conversations, Better Place Australia has amended the process whereby the first mediation session is a 1:1 session with the mediator, conducted separately with each party. The assessment (which occurs prior to the 1:1 appointment) focuses on the complexity of the case (i.e., levels of family violence, other risk factors, key property complexity questions). In the following 1:1 appointment the focus is on preparing for the information needed in the joint/shuttle mediation. Questions surrounding what is in the asset list (apart from the complexity questions) were moved into the 1:1 appointment where we drill down into the details of the asset and liabilities list.

This allows for parties to be fully engaged in providing information without interruption and without waiting for the other person to complete their elements of it, particularly if the mediation is to be shuttle. At these appointments, parties are thoroughly guided through the following:

- Develop the asset and liabilities list to the best of their knowledge
- Explain their view about contributions
- Explain their view about future needs.

Parties may or may not have an idea of their proposals but are not asked in detail about this at the 1:1 stage – although by this stage, there is a general sense of someone's view on the split. Going into specifics, at

this stage, is not done due to the inability to properly calculate the terms of the proposal until we know what the details of the full asset pool are. For example, if both parties want a 50-50 split, but they disagree on the value of the house they will therefore have a difference in equity. The actual proposal of payout figure (if one is obtaining the home) would be quite different in those circumstances.

These appointments are 2 hours long (the normal length of our mediation appointments). This allows clients to consider what they are saying, and to consider ways to frame their ideas so that they may have more chance of success in being received and considered by the other party.

As part of the process, documents that are to be revealed to the other party are prepared with the attending party, and consent is obtained to release this information to the other party in the joint/shuttle session. Their former partner is not provided with this information prior to the session, but the information is shared as a launching pad during the first part of the joint/shuttle session. The party who is attending the 1:1 is provided with the work from their session so that they can seek further legal advice and have it as a resource in the mediation.

In this appointment, we continue to assess whether mediation is still suitable. Sometimes, the session confirms that mediation is going to be useful. Other times, it might reveal something that would indicate this matter should not go to a joint/shuttle session. Issues that might stop mediation proceeding may include things like further disclosure of family violence (for example, financial abuse), issues with full and frank disclosure, where at least one party is unwilling to disclose, or financial deception either between parties, or to authorities such as to Centrelink or the Tax Office.

In this process, many parties have reported that they are coming into the joint/shuttle session much better prepared due this initial step. They have a greater understanding of the process and know what to expect prior to coming into the session. Sometimes parties have had an opportunity to vent their frustrations, decide whether to express this to the other party or whether it might be too emotive and derail the mediation.

In preparation for the joint/shuttle session, the mediator combines the information of the parties from their asset and liabilities list. The contributions and future needs are also reviewed for familiarity, but these documents are not combined.

Once we come into the joint/shuttle session, the usual FDR (Family Dispute Resolution) openings occur, and we commence with sharing the joint asset and liabilities list (presented on a spreadsheet). The parties are explained that the FDRP will display and explain the information that the parties have provided in their 1:1 appointment. We have highlighted where the parties are still needing agreement. Parties are taken through what each of them has stated about the asset and liabilities list and their values. Once taken through the sharing of information, the areas of agreement and disagreement between the parties becomes clear and the parties are then focused on the items or values where they are not in agreement.

## Case Study

The client commenced property mediation with a small asset pool comprising primarily of superannuation. There were, however, several significant debts that needed to be discussed and the parties also sought to discuss the division of household items. The 1:1 property session was extremely beneficial in the context of a modest asset pool as the parties initially saw the pool as simple, only involving several key assets and liabilities. However, upon greater discussion in the 1:1 session the parties separately realised there was more to discuss than was originally thought. The 1:1 session enabled the Practitioner to fully explore with the parties all items they wished to address in the joint mediation. This further enabled the Practitioner to highlight the areas in which the parties would benefit from receiving legal advice prior to the joint session and provide some coaching to the parties to encourage them to discuss with their lawyer's potential settlement proposals which could be brought into the joint session.

As the parties had the benefit of seeing their asset and liability schedule prior to the joint mediation, they were comfortable with the concept of establishing the asset pool and the format in which it was presented. The parties were able to address each item on the balance sheet methodically and in a considered manner. Some items required further advice and contemplation by the parties after the first joint session, but the parties made far more progress in the session, having had the benefit of the 1:1 preparation session prior, than they would have if they had progressed directly to the joint session after initial intake.

The conversation is supported on each item, and the mediator explores what could be done to move towards agreements on these items. Often conversations centre around how assets/liabilities could be valued, or parties are requesting documentation for confirmation of values. As more items are agreed to, the yellow highlights on the spreadsheet are removed and the cells become white. Our experience is that parties (and mediators) are encouraged as more white colouring appears in the asset and liabilities list.

Sometimes parties get stuck and need to do further 'homework' to work through issues. Often, things like valuation strategies or further investigation into documentation needs to be agreed to. At this stage we can park the asset and liabilities list and move onto contributions and future needs.

To explore contributions and future needs, the information obtained in the 1:1 session is shared with the other party. Parties are encouraged that, in contrast to the assets and liabilities list, they do not need to fully agree to everything. The purpose in these stages is to hear each other out, seeking to understand and ask questions or provide clarity as needed.

At this point, depending on the completion or progress of the assets and liabilities list, we may move to proposals, or we may need to allow time for the parties to complete their 'homework' to assist with getting to a fully agreed assets and liabilities list. Once the assets and liabilities list is completed, we can then look at proposals and start to do calculations to show the practicalities of the more generalised proposals that are often made.

## Advantages of the preparation process

One of the key advantages and purposes of the 1:1 appointment is that parties are feeling much more thoroughly prepared prior to engaging in a session where the other party is involved.

Over the last few years, we have noticed the following benefits for our clients:

- Parties are supported to present the information they have at hand
- Parties are supported to develop questions that they will take back to their lawyers, accountants, or other sources of information
- Further information gathering may be suggested that will assist with the mediation
- Parties are given space to raise anything that may be concerning them during their 1:1, but then they are given opportunity to consider whether it is relevant for their overall settlement and to consider whether or how they want to say it. This allows for the joint/shuttle session to be more focused on the conversations that are relevant and important for the property settlement.

In addition, during the sessions more information is obtained that can influence the ongoing assessment of suitability to proceed with mediation. Sometimes power dynamics are discovered where one party has all the information and the other has none. This is not necessarily a problem if both parties are engaging in full and frank disclosure. However, the 1:1 appointment can assist the party's ability to engage in releasing the required information.

It is important that there is a dynamic risk assessment approach throughout the process. Each step can provide more information and sometimes this means the matter becomes not suitable for mediation. Less often, the 1:1 appointment can reveal dishonesty either between the parties or to authorities. This can alert the practitioner that this matter is not appropriate to continue to mediation. Once the joint/shuttle session is arrived at, our practitioners are finding that mediation is progressing in a timelier fashion. Prior to the change the average was 87.5 days from first joint/shuttle mediation to last appointment, and with the new process this has been reduced to 71.7 days. This is because the parties are better prepared, know what to expect, and the key issues in dispute can be focused on.

## Lessons Learned

One of the key lessons we have learned from this process is how a change in practice can provide scaffolding to support clients to properly prepare for mediation. Gone are the days where parties turn up to mediation not understanding their own asset pool, and then not doing homework to investigate values and documentation. Parties are supported to know exactly what they need and are supported to prepare this information. Parties get a sense during their 1:1 of what the mediation is going to be like and are made aware of what remaining issues need to be followed up.

Like any process, it is important that the clients are adequately informed about the steps in the process, and what to expect along the way. Clients also appreciate that we are not double handling information. Since introducing the change, complaints about collecting information in assessments but then not using it in mediation have ceased.

An important learning from this process was the need for a common tool to collect the information, and combine and share the information in a document that was live and could be amended during the joint/shuttle sessions. Better Place Australia uses an Excel spreadsheet for this tool.

With more appointments being held via telehealth since COVID-19, the sharing of a spreadsheet during mediation is a simple task.

The sessions are more focused and productive with the 1:1 being focused on preparing material, and then the joint/shuttle being able to focus on the issues where there is not agreement.

## Conclusion

Better Place Australia has found that by adding a step to the property mediation process, this has resulted in improvements in client experience and outcomes. These include more 'headspace time' for clarity of each party's thinking, less time spent in the subsequent steps, greater preparedness for the joint/shuttle session, reflection time to consider what to say and how to say it, planning time to explore and get legal advice on specific issues. Our overall conclusion is that this additional step of a 1:1 session as part of the mediation process is of significant benefit to the parties and the process. We will continue to reflect on this process and will consider how we can best build on this process as well as consider the tools that are used in the process.

## Acknowledgements

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