

A woman with long dark hair is seen from behind, holding a young child. They are standing in a field of hot air balloons at sunrise. The woman is pointing upwards towards the sky. The child is wearing a colorful patterned top. The woman is wearing a dark blue patterned top. The background shows several hot air balloons in various colors (red, yellow, purple, green) against a bright, hazy sky. A white car is visible in the distance on the right.

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

Victorian State Budget Submission 2025-26

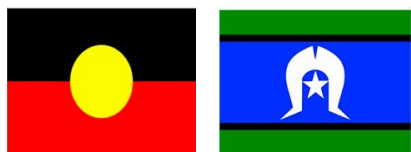
The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria and Tasmania, representing around 180 community service organisations, students and individuals. The Centre advocates for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. Our vision is to see a community that is fair, equitable and creates opportunities for children and their families to live happy and healthy lives.

We thank our members and individuals with lived experience for their insights and suggestions which have helped inform the content of the Centre's 2025-26 budget submission.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Centre acknowledges the past and present traditional custodians of the land on which we work. We pay respect to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and that this was and always will be Aboriginal land.



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Overview

The vital role of family services in keeping families together and safe

Victoria's family services prevent tens of thousands of families every year from spiralling into crisis. They connect family members to the support they need to prevent child removal and family breakdown. Their early intervention helps prevent intergenerational trauma.

Family Services work actively with Child Protection to reduce risk for children and families. A recent Victorian coronial inquest highlighted the importance of community agencies working closely with child protection services to enable children's safety to be prioritised.

Family services provide an ongoing point of connection for vulnerable families so that even if these families enter the out of home care or child protection service systems for a time, family services are always working to return families back to their community with the appropriate support.

Victoria's family services are client led, evidence led, culturally safe, inclusive, flexible and responsive to the diverse needs of families. They are the *lynchpin* enabling families to navigate the interconnections between universal, allied health, family violence, mental health, housing, financial, and drug and alcohol services.

Family services provide government with savings by stopping families from spiralling into a downward trajectory requiring costly intensive crisis services. Their role has been pivotal in times of disaster and emergency in communities, particularly in regional areas. Their support holds communities together.

Without family services, more children would be removed from their homes and more families would be caught up in an endless cycle of violence, poverty, homelessness and other challenges. We cannot afford to lose the very heart of our service system through inadequate funding.

In the 2024-25 Victorian State Budget, the Centre welcomed significant investment in the services that deliver vital support for families, and in our child and family services system, including:

- Strong families, safe children – \$197.6 million invested over two years
- School saving bonus – \$281.6 million in 2024-25
- Glasses for kids' program – \$6.8 million in 2024-25
- Delivering child protection and care services – \$128.1 million over 4 years
- Supports for people with disability outside the NDIS – \$23.1 million in 2024-25.

The Centre's 2025-26 budget submission builds on this existing investment and focuses on those areas where government action and investment could make a meaningful difference to the lives of children, young people and families. Family services in particular require urgent investment if children are to be kept from harm and families supported to thrive. They are frontline, essential services which are there from a family's earliest needs through to disaster responses and recovery.

The Centre's 2025-26 budget submission highlights the need for continued investment in family services to provide greater numbers of children and their families with localised responses that

strengthen the family's capacity to safely care for their children. Our service providers help ease the burden on child protection and prevent children from being placed into care with all the associated trauma that brings.

The consequences of *not* investing adequately in family services is likely to be dire, with more expensive acute interventions being needed to meet the challenges posed by children and families in crisis situations which could have been avoided with sustained investment in the family services system.

Increased focus on children

Having a dedicated Minister for Children reflects the Victorian Government's strong commitment to making sure children are not forgotten in policy decision making. The Centre welcomes Victoria's whole-of-government decision to prioritise children. This is nation leading, with the potential to change children's lives in significant ways.

Children have unique needs. Nationally and locally, we need a more focused and streamlined approach to policies and programs affecting children. We need a children's framework which brings together the principles underpinning our vision for children, sets out key priority areas and is accompanied by an action plan with deliverables and ministerial portfolio responsibilities. We also need children to be part of the solution, their voices incorporated into every policy decision which affects their development, safety and wellbeing.

The Centre's budget submission highlights the need for providing the earliest possible help to children if they are to grow up in safe and nurturing home environments. In particular, we need to make sure children in care, children with disabilities, children in the child justice system, First Nations children, children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, and children who have been subject to harm and maltreatment, including family violence and child sexual abuse, can all receive the support needed to thrive.

While the Victorian Government is to be commended for the steps it is taking to make sure children are prioritised in policy decisions, there is much more to be done if children are to be truly listened to and engaged in meaningful ways across the breadth of the service system.

Our key areas of focus for budgetary consideration

The Centre's 2025-26 budget submission builds on the State Government's existing investment and focuses on those areas where government action and investment could make a meaningful difference to the lives of children, young people and families. We have identified the following priorities for urgent consideration by government:

- Investing in family services so that families in Victoria can be connected into the supports they need at the time these are needed to prevent children being removed from their homes and being caught up in the statutory system.
- Creating a whole-of-government Framework for Children with a clear vision for children in Victoria, priority areas, and an action plan with deliverables and ministerial

portfolio responsibilities to provide a coordinated approach to all policy and funding decisions affecting children.

- Providing additional therapeutic support and training to enable carers to meet the trauma and additional needs of children who are placed in care.
- Providing equitable access to early learning and education opportunities for families experiencing complex challenges, so that all Victorian children can thrive.
- Investing in proven diversion programs to keep children out of the child justice system and supporting those who do become enmeshed with wraparound support to prevent re-entry.
- Investing in the pipeline of graduates coming into community services to increase workforce diversity and graduate job readiness.

Priority Area 1: Building stronger families together

Investing in proven programs

Families can experience, often concurrently, many different challenges such as poverty, family violence, homelessness, mental health, alcohol and other drug abuse, racism and discrimination and the impacts of intergenerational trauma. There is compelling evidence to show the short- and long-term impact these challenges can have on a child's physical, intellectual, emotional and social development and identity including their life trajectories and opportunities.

Compared to other jurisdictions globally, Victoria has a well-established and unique family services sector. Around 2,000 skilled professionals from 157 agencies, including 18 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), provide a wide range of services each year to tens of thousands of Victorian families experiencing hardship and/or disadvantage.

With increased investment, Victoria could meet the needs of many more families earlier in people's lives before problems become entrenched. There is a strong body of research to show that helping families at the earliest possible opportunity is more cost effective than intervening at the tertiary (statutory) level.¹

Families can access child and family services directly in their own communities or might be linked through contact with Child Protection when there are harm or maltreatment concerns. Family services collaboration with child protection workers is vital in making sure needs are triaged, assessed and then given appropriate pathways to more specialised support when families need this.

Family services support children with a range of different needs, experiences and backgrounds. They provide an entry point to services and supports such as housing, drug and alcohol services, mental health, maternal and child health, financial services, settlement services, specialist family violence services, and programs which offer more specialised family support.

For families to get the help they need, the State Government needs to continue funding programs along the continuum of family services – from early help in universal and local settings to more intensive service responses where there is contact with statutory systems. Such funding would align with the new family services framework which is structured around connecting, strengthening and restoring.

The Government has invested significantly in a suite of programs such as Early Help, Putting Families First, and Family Preservation and Reunification but, given their considerable impact on so many Victorian families, these family services programs need to be funded recurrently. We need to be able to provide families with 'step up', 'step down' service options according to their specific needs at the time.

¹ House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (2018). Evidence-based early years intervention: Eleventh Report of Session 2017-19. House of Commons.

The Early Help program, for example, co-locates family services practitioners in universal service settings to provide easy and early support for children and families and opening up referral pathways into more specialist support. Over 3,500 Victorian families are supported through early help family services, with only 7 per cent being referred to more intensive family services.²

Continuing investment in this prevention and early intervention program would help prevent significant numbers of children and families from escalating into more costly acute services. The Centre asks that the State Government expand this program into additional universal settings to reach more families, which in the long run will also help reduce costs for government.

Putting Families First is a community-driven, intensive response which enables families with complex needs in contact with the child protection and child justice systems to receive individual support, making it easier for them to access services specific to their needs. The program has shown promising results in the two pilot areas and needs further funding to expand the benefits of its impact to more families and to continue growing a robust evidence base.

The Family Preservation and Reunification Response offers a strengths-based, culturally safe, trauma-informed and family-centred approach to families at risk of entry into child protection. The model supports families who have been identified as being at risk by child protection but who have not yet received support services due to demand and waitlists. Department data shows FPR has contributed to a 17 per cent reduction in the number of children who would otherwise have entered care.³

Recommendation 1: That the State Government expands the Early Help Family Services to universal settings in high-risk areas of Victoria and funds this program recurrently.

Recommendation 2: That the State Government continues to invest in the promising Putting Families First program to support at risk families to access specific supports as needed.

Recommendation 3: That the State Government provide continued investment in FPR to prevent harm to children and where there is risk, to prevent this from escalating, provide continuity of care to families, and deliver support services prior and post reunification.

Families in safe and secure housing

A recent survey of member organisations by the Centre highlighted that housing insecurity continues to be an ongoing problem experienced by many Victorians impacted by economic hardship.

Private rental costs are expensive and low-income government payments are not enough to meet the rising costs, while there is insufficient stock of social housing and long waitlists. Survey data

² Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (November 2024). From insights to action: How evidence is informing family services reform. Family Services Symposium. Slide presentation.

³ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (November 2024).

also highlighted the impact of the current housing crisis on families anxious about not being able to meet their children's needs and what this might mean for potential child protection involvement.

Children experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity can disengage from school and their community, unable to access play and leisure activities they enjoy, and unable to live near friends and family support networks. There are proven models of housing which could be invested in by the State Government. Homes for Families, for example, provided an opportunity for family services to offer step-up, step-down family service responses to the people experiencing hardship in the community. Without this program many of the families who participated would not have had access to these services because they did not have access to stable housing.

The government's Homeless to a Home program during the Covid-19 pandemic was a significant investment which saw 1,845 households given rapid access to stable and affordable housing to prevent further harm from rough sleeping or living in emergency accommodation.⁴ Homes for Families is another successful program which could be considered for ongoing investment.

These models could be revitalised to address the ongoing impacts of the state-wide housing crisis, allowing families at risk an opportunity to find a safe and secure place to call home.

Recommendation 4: That the State Government invest in proven models of housing to enable children and their families at greatest risk of homelessness to live in safe and stable accommodation with ready access to family services.

⁴ Gower, A., Nygaard, C., Alves, T., Brackertz, N. and Randall, S. (2024). From Homelessness to a Home (H2H) Outcomes Evaluation, AHURI Professional Services for Department of Families, Fairness and Housing Victoria, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne.

Priority Area 2: Empowering our carers

Foster care for Victoria's future

Home-based carers provide homes for children who are unable to live with their birth parents for a range of reasons, including abuse or neglect, family violence, parental substance abuse, mental health challenges, parental illness or death, or the need to provide the child with a more protective environment.

The State Government's vision for foster care in Victoria is for an inclusive, responsive, and child-centred system, where each child and young person can thrive within a stable, nurturing environment. Such a model will be grounded in trauma-informed and culturally safe practices and centred on the voices and expertise of carers and children. It will also increase foster carer access to therapeutic specialists and to peer-led support in local communities.

While the demand for home-based care in Victoria is growing, the number of individuals or households willing and able to provide foster care is declining. There is an urgent need to improve the retention of skilled and trained carers. For Aboriginal children, the need is even more acute given the shortage of First Nations foster carers and the evidence which shows Aboriginal children are more likely to thrive when in Aboriginal care and connected to community, culture and Country.

For every \$1 invested in foster care, Victoria sees an economic return of nearly \$8, highlighting the social and financial value of supporting foster carers.⁵ Those providing the care, however, have not seen an increase in their support payments since 2016, while the most recent carer census found that 40 per cent of kinship carers have a yearly household income below \$40,000 and are not receiving the support they need to provide stable homes for children and young people in their care.⁶

By increasing the financial support payment available to carers in Victoria, and by working closely with the Commonwealth Government to provide financial incentives for carers, Victoria's carers will find some relief from cost-of-living pressures and be better able to support themselves and the children they care for.

The Centre is a member of the National Foster Care Sustainability Group which has advocated for:

- Priority access to medical and therapeutic support through the introduction of a card system – similar to the Veterans' Health Card – to ensure all children in care have better access to essential medical, therapeutic and developmental services.
- Reduced financial pressure on foster carers by raising the ATO tax-free threshold, which would ease financial pressures and enable higher carer allowances without tax burdens;

⁵ The Cube Group (2022). Valuing Something That Really Matters: The Economic Value of Foster Care in Victoria (unpublished)

⁶ Commission for Children and Young People (2023). Let us learn: Systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in out-of-home care. p.38.

Carers in Victoria are among the lowest paid care givers in Australia. By doubling the federal government's Low Income Superannuation Tax Offset rate to \$1000, carers plan for a more secure financial future and be incentivised to enter or to continue foster care.

- Provision of equitable leave entitlements for foster carers by adjusting the National Employment Standards to help foster carers in paid employment to start or continue fostering.

These asks provide a sound platform from which to continue advocating nationally and at the state level for better support for foster carers.

Recommendation 5: That the State Government works closely with the Federal Government to bring in reforms aligned with the National Foster Care Sustainability Group asks.

Support for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) providing foster care

Government policy is for Aboriginal children in mainstream care to be cared for by Aboriginal families with the support of local ACCOs. Where this is not possible, mainstream service providers who are caring for an Aboriginal child need to work closely with the local ACCO to make sure the child is connected to their community, culture, and Country. For this to happen, there also needs to be a proportionate transferral of mainstream resources to support that child and their Aboriginal foster family.

Recommendation 6: That the State Government adequately resource ACCOs who want to provide a foster care service to support Aboriginal foster carer recruitment and retention and enable Aboriginal children in foster care to thrive.

Strengthening carer training to better support children with disabilities in care

Children with disability continue to be overrepresented in care in Victoria and Australia although currently there is no nationally consistent definition of disability or reliable prevalence data.⁷ The Victorian child and family services sector supports families where one or more family members live with disability. In addition to trauma-related training, foster care service providers have identified an urgent need for training to be provided to carers of children and young people with complex needs, such as mental health challenges and disability. A number of providers currently work with evidence-based models which establish a community of support around carers and

⁷ Cheng, Z., Tani, M. & Katz, I. (2023). Outcomes for children with disability in out-of-home care: Evidence from the pathways of care longitudinal study in Australia. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 143. <https://dcj.nsw.gov.au/documents/about-us/facsiar/pocls/pocls-publications/outcomes-for-children-with-disability.pdf>

children and the Centre supports the government's intention to pilot a small number of similar carer-led networks in local areas.

Recommendation 7: That the State Government invests in building the capacity of carers to provide trauma-informed support to children, including children with disability and/or complex medical needs, through tailored training, better access to therapeutic specialists and community-based carer networks.

Priority Area 3: Improving the lives of all Victorian children

Children experiencing harm/maltreatment

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) highlights the number of children and young people who have been exposed to different forms of harm and maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, domestic violence) and the long-term impact of such exposure on their lives. The child and family services sector is well-placed to lead the development of a strategic approach that addresses the ACMS findings.

Prior to the creation of The Orange Door, Victoria had Child FIRST which functioned as an entry point to family services and specialist services. This model meant that parenting concerns and potential risks to children could be identified and addressed early. It also meant where risks were more significant, families could be connected to specialist services, including specialist family violence.

Around 60 per cent of families in The Orange Door are referred on to child and family services. The Orange Door has absorbed Child FIRST but not all of its functions. In a triage model, the needs of children and young people experiencing maltreatment or harm, including cumulative harm, are not always identified or prioritised. The system is overburdened. Domestic and family violence services, and sexual assault services, must be able to deliver supports that are child and young person centred and informed by children's perspectives. In The Orange Door, all workers need to be able to work confidently with children, incorporating their views in the decisions affecting them.

Recommendation 8: That the State Government reviews the operational model of The Orange Door to determine what needs to change if children and their families are to receive an appropriate, timely and effective service.

Education outcomes for children in care

Children and young people in out of home care experience significantly higher rates of disengagement from school compared to their peers.⁸ Around 73 per cent of these young people have a history of placement instability, having experienced five or more placements in different households.⁹ The 2023 Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) report on the educational experiences of children in care found that secondary students in care had an average

⁸ Commission for Children and Young People. (2020). Keep caring: Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care. Commission for Children and Young People. p.26.

⁹ Ibid.

of 8 per cent lower attendance rates than their peers and were five times more likely than their peers to be suspended and expelled from school between 2018 and 2022.¹⁰

The Centre's Raising Expectations program provides a unique platform for government, universities, TAFEs and the community sector to work together to improve access to and successful completion of vocational and/or higher education study for individuals who have been in care.

An independent evaluation of the program found that Raising Expectations has led to tangible improvements in the education and life opportunities for care-experienced young people.¹¹ Continuing investment in this proven model would allow the Centre to reach more care leavers to support access to and successful completion of post-secondary study.

Recommendation 9: That the State Government provide long-term funding for the Raising Expectations program to support the specific educational needs of care-experienced young people.

Children and families with disability

Children with disability are amongst several groups who regularly experience discrimination and abuse, and whose rights are not adequately protected.¹² While inconsistent definitions and lack of available data makes it difficult to determine the level of discrimination children with disability experience, there is evidence to show that children with disability are more likely to have experienced repeated incidents of sexual abuse by the time they are 18 years old than children without disability¹³ and are disproportionately vulnerable to maltreatment in institutional care.¹⁴

Children and young people with disabilities are over-represented in the statutory and child justice systems.¹⁵ A recent survey of our members by the Centre found that carers and families face many barriers when intersecting with the disability support sector, including complex assessment and reporting requirements, inaccessible language, poor inter-departmental and inter-sectoral collaboration, and breakdown of the care arrangements. Children with disability who are placed

¹⁰ Commission for Children and Young People. (2023). Let Us Learn: Systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in out-of-home care. Commission for Children and Young People. p.22.

¹¹ Australian Council for Educational Research (2023). Raising Expectations program: Evaluation report. Unpublished.

¹² Australian Human Rights Commission (2019). Children's Rights in Australia: A scorecard. Australian Human Rights Commission.

¹³ Ibid, p. 109.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. Vol. 8. Criminal justice and people with disability.

in out-of-home care may have experienced trauma, abuse and/or neglect in the family home and they typically have multiple, intersecting, complex needs.¹⁶

The family services-based Specialist Disability Practitioner Support Program is well placed in the family services sector to help meet the needs of children and/or their parent with a disability. They can assist families navigate the NDIS and Foundational Support Services and are an invaluable resource to keep marginalised children and families connected to support services. Our Centre survey highlighted how invaluable these roles are in helping families.

The Centre is a member the Victorian Children and Family Supports Alliance (VCaFSA), which has been established to help inform the development of foundational supports for children aged 0-9 with developmental differences and disabilities, and their families.

Inclusion programs, such as the Victorian Department of Education's Access to Early Learning, Pre School Field Officers and School Readiness Funding are intended to facilitate access to mainstream learning. They help make educational settings more accessible to children with developmental delays or disability, so they do not miss out on the vital early building blocks of learning. Their function is to enable children with disability, developmental delay and/or additional needs to access mainstream settings with their peers. It is important that inclusion supports are not perceived or treated as foundational supports but as complementary to these.

We ask that the Victorian Government scales up family services to be able to provide timely, strengths-based, knowledgeable and early support in the life of a child with disability or developmental delay and their families. Family services, with their strength-based approaches, are well positioned to be anchor organisations for the new foundational supports, providing information, advice, peer outreach, connections to a range of other services and supports, and liaise with universal services and disability-led organisations.

Our members report examples, contrary to legislative and policy requirements, of children being turned away from some childcare centres because of the complexity of their needs. Embed family services practitioners in local early years education settings to support children's inclusion and to assist families navigate the service system.

Recommendation 10: That the State Government provide ongoing funding for the Family Services Specialist Disability Support Program to help meet increasing demand.

¹⁶ Commission for Children and Young People (2021). Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. Violence and abuse of people with disability at home. Commission for Children and Young People: Melbourne.
<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/assets/Submissions/Submission-to-Disability-Royal-Commission-Violence-and-abuse-at-home.pdf>

Recommendation 11: That the State Government fund family services to be anchor organisations in local networks of interconnected, family-focused, foundational supports and resources, including disability led organisations and specialist services.

Trauma-informed, inclusive education for all Victorian children

Children are disengaging from education at an earlier age than in previous years, which highlights the need for early interventions to support re-engagement before it becomes too late.¹⁷ A key recommendation of the CCYP Let us Learn report is that trauma-informed training be incorporated into teacher education programs and early childhood educator training, which the Victorian government has accepted.

All children need equal access to education and care. However, some groups of children, such as First Nations children, children living with disabilities or additional needs, and/or children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, might need extra support to facilitate their full access and participation in early learning services. The inclusion of these children in high quality education and care that meets their health, learning, developmental, and cultural needs can provide protective barriers for families, and allow children to thrive despite difficult circumstances.

Reducing the barriers to access and participation for these families can be supported by outreach programs that allow family services to reach these populations and work alongside the whole family. Interpreters and bilingual staff can reduce systemic barriers for families by supporting enrolment and continual participation in early education and care, including kindergarten, and can provide resources in language for families of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Recommendation 12: That the State Government invest in outreach programs run by child and family services to engage families experiencing vulnerability with services that support them in the early years of a child's life (such as maternal and child health services and culturally safe playgroups).

Recommendation 13: That the State Government ensures every primary and secondary educator in the state has been trained to recognise and respond appropriately to trauma affecting children and young people and their families.

¹⁷ CCYP (2023). Let us Learn. p.290.

Priority Area 4: Improving outcomes for young people at risk

Child justice

Victoria has a unique opportunity, following on from the changes in the Youth Justice Bill 2024, to reframe justice for children and young people with a child's rights lens. Consistent with the language of the National Children's Commissioner, Anne Hollands, the Centre recommends using the term 'child justice system' instead of 'youth justice system' to better reflect a child rights approach to justice.¹⁸ By raising the age of criminal responsibility in our state to 12 years of age, the Victorian Government has recognised that the current justice system is not designed to support a child's rehabilitation and recovery and does not meet the needs of young people or families who have had contact with the system.

Diversion, early intervention and support for families

The Youth Justice Bill 2024 emphasises the guiding principles of prevention, diversion and minimum intervention when a child or young person enters, or is at risk of entering, the youth justice system. It is important that the Victorian Government continue to invest in diversionary programs which address underlying risk factors for children and young people, prevent reoffending and keep communities safe.

Victoria already has in place proven programs including Multisystemic Therapy (MST) and Functioning Family Therapy (FFT) which have successfully diverted young people through a family-based approach rather than a punitive one. Similarly, the successful Youth Support Service and Embedded Youth Outreach Program run by YSAS in collaboration with Victoria Police uses a strengths- and resilience-based approach to connecting young people into supportive services and opportunities.

Recommendation 14: That the State Government continues to invest in diversion and rehabilitation programs specifically designed to support children and young people who have been in contact with the child justice system.

Young people using violence in the home (AVITH)

In Victoria, there has been a gradual shift away from a focus on young people who are labelled 'perpetrators' to a focus on the trauma backgrounds, developmental needs, disability status and other complex intersectional needs of young people who use violence in the home.

Despite the growth in research on this issue, there remain significant gaps in current understandings of how best to respond to the various underlying factors which have contributed to the violence. A 2022 ANROWS study found that 89 per cent of young people who used violence

¹⁸ Australian Human Rights Commission (2024). Help Way Earlier. p.4.
https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/1807_help_way_earlier_-_accessible_0.pdf

in the home reported previous experiences of child abuse, highlighting the need for primary prevention strategies.¹⁹ Viewing this form of abuse through a trauma-informed lens, rather than solely through a family violence lens, helps to see the young person as a victim-survivor of abuse in their own right. The government needs to continue investing in programs which focus on early intervention with young children when the first signs of aggression are evident, on trauma-informed models of care, and on programs which support young people who are neurodivergent given the high proportion of neurodivergence in the cohort of young people using violence in the home. There also needs to be a stronger focus on children under 10 when they first show signs of aggression in the home.

Recommendation 15: That the State Government continues to invest in therapeutic models of care to address the needs of children and young people using violence in the home and their families.

¹⁹ ANROWS (2022). Adolescent family violence in Australia: A national study of prevalence, history of childhood victimisation and impacts. <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/adolescent-family-violence-in-australia-a-national-study-of-prevalence-history-of-childhood-victimisation-and-impacts/>

Priority Area 5: Creating a strong and capable workforce

Professional development

The pilot Switch to Social Work (STSW) program offers a new pathway for skilled people wanting to work with children and families. This unique tripartite model brings together CSOs, government and university to support trainees while they learn and gain valuable workplace experience during paid sector placements. Feedback from CSO host organisations and STSW participants has highlighted the importance of this initiative in building a skilled and diverse workforce, led by the sector's peak body and embedded in organisations, in meeting the growing demand for practice-ready social workers.

Recommendation 16: That the government fund an extension and adaptation of the Switch to Social Work program to enable second year Masters of Social Work participants to be in paid placements with community sector organisations while they study and become job ready.

New technologies for the future of social work

The child and family services sector is already being impacted by digital transformation. The integration of technology and artificial intelligence (AI) in the community services sector presents significant opportunities and risks, particularly in supporting children, young people, and families experiencing disadvantage.

As technology-facilitated abuse and online child sexual exploitation become more prevalent, our workforce need to be able to prevent and address the harms being done to clients.

On the positive side, there are benefits to investing in this form of technology. AI can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of social services by automating administrative tasks and allowing more time for direct client interactions and service delivery. Predictive analytics can help identify at-risk individuals and families earlier, enabling timely interventions and potentially preventing crises, and digital platforms can facilitate better communication and coordination among service providers, ensuring a more holistic approach to care.

There is a need for our sector to remain knowledgeable and confident in using rapidly evolving technology.

Recommendation 17: That the State Government provide leadership in supporting the child and family services workforce to better understand the risks and opportunities associated with using AI in the context of social work.

Priority Area 6: Strengthening Victoria's evidence-building infrastructure

Continue government leadership in evidence building

The Outcomes, Practice and Evidence Network (OPEN) was set up in 2017 to foster a learning culture which would support child and family services to build and share evidence from research, evaluation, practice and client experience to deliver better outcomes for children, young people and families.

Since then, OPEN has been a key driver of increased sector understanding and use of evidence to support service delivery. CSOs have contributed to published research, shared expertise, undertaken outcomes measurement as a core part of clinical practice, embedded evaluation into organisational practice, and partnered with external research or evaluation experts.

OPEN has the potential to be a global leader in using lived experience to drive reform, consolidate and disseminate knowledge about EBMs, harness transformative technologies to improve professional capability and client outcomes, and use practice expertise to embed a culture of continuous improvement in service delivery.

There is also scope to expand the range of knowledge hubs available on the OPEN portal to all services which interact with children at little cost to government. The Centre, No to Violence, Safe and Equal and SASVic have recently collaborated on a program of work involving knowledge-sharing workshops, an Evidence Guide and a dedicated Knowledge Hub. This model could easily be extended to other related disciplines, supporting an expansion of dedicated Knowledge Hubs for the benefit of every practitioner working with children and families. OPEN has the potential to become a world-leading multidisciplinary hub of online resources and research aimed at improving service responses to clients across a range of sectors and workforces.

In this period of fiscal constraint, OPEN can assist the government to gather the evidence, and clearly highlight what is working to get the best outcomes for Victorian children, young people and families. This approach ultimately saves the government money by making sure investment is going where it is most needed.

Recommendation 18: That the State Government continue to invest in the work of OPEN to reach the broadest number of practitioners from multiple intersecting workforces to provide service delivery in line with the best available evidence and technologies.

Appendix: Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: That the State Government expands the Early Help Family Services to universal settings in high-risk areas of Victoria and funds this program recurrently.

Recommendation 2: That the State Government continues to invest in the promising Putting Families First program to support at risk families to access specific supports as needed.

Recommendation 3: That the State Government provide continued investment in FPR to prevent harm to children and where there is risk, to prevent this from escalating, provide continuity of care to families, and deliver support services prior and post reunification.

Recommendation 4: That the State Government invest in proven models of housing to enable children and their families at greatest risk of homelessness to live in safe and stable accommodation with ready access to family services.

Recommendation 5: That the State Government works closely with the Federal Government to bring in reforms aligned with the National Foster Care Sustainability Group asks.

Recommendation 6: That the State Government adequately resource ACCOs who want to provide a foster care service to support Aboriginal foster carer recruitment and retention and enable Aboriginal children in foster care to thrive.

Recommendation 7: That the State Government invests in building the capacity of carers to provide trauma-informed support to children, including children with disability and/or complex medical needs, through tailored training, better access to therapeutic specialists and community-based carer networks.

Recommendation 8: That the State Government reviews the operational model of The Orange Door to determine what needs to change if children and their families are to receive an appropriate, timely and effective service.

Recommendation 9: That the State Government provide long-term funding for the Raising Expectations program to support the specific educational needs of care-experienced young people.

Recommendation 10: That the State Government provide ongoing funding for the Family Services Specialist Disability Support Program to help meet increasing demand.

Recommendation 11: That the State Government fund family services to be anchor organisations in local networks of interconnected, family-focused, foundational supports and resources, including disability led organisations and specialist services.

Recommendation 12: That the State Government invest in outreach programs run by child and family services to engage families experiencing vulnerability with services that support them in the

early years of a child's life (such as maternal and child health services and culturally safe playgroups).

Recommendation 13: That the State Government ensures every primary and secondary educator in the state has been trained to recognise and respond appropriately to trauma affecting children and young people and their families.

Recommendation 14: That the State Government continues to invest in diversion and rehabilitation programs specifically designed to support children and young people who have been in contact with the child justice system

Recommendation 15: That the State Government continues to invest in therapeutic models of care to address the needs of children and young people using violence in the home and their families.

Recommendation 16: That the government fund an extension and adaptation of the Switch to Social Work program to enable second year Masters of Social Work participants to be in paid placements with community sector organisations while they study and become job ready.

Recommendation 17: That the State Government provide leadership in supporting the child and family services workforce to better understand the risks and opportunities associated with using AI in the context of social work.

Recommendation 18: That the State Government continue to invest in the work of OPEN to reach the broadest number of practitioners from multiple intersecting workforces to provide service delivery in line with the best available evidence and technologies.

