

# Supporting parent participation in a child protection investigation

## A resource for practitioners working with birth parents during a child protection investigation

The Voice of Parents project worked alongside Victorian birth parents with lived experience of child protection and child and family service contact. These parents talked about their opportunities for inclusion and participation during a child protection investigation, and helped us to understand what this experience is like for them. This resource discusses how practitioners can support a parent-inclusive child protection investigation, based on solutions identified in our work with parents as well as best practice guidance identified in research.

**Prioritising child safety is a critical part of this engagement and is ultimately most important.** This resource recognises research that shows improved outcomes, including enhanced safety for children and young people, can be achieved when their parents are effectively engaged by services including child protection<sup>1</sup>.

### What does a family-focused approach look like?

The Victorian child protection manual says that “child abuse and neglect is a product of a poor parent-child relationship, which often occurs in the context of other forms of family breakdown<sup>2</sup>”. This highlights the role that a family-focused approach can play in supporting child wellbeing and safety. In the context of supporting children, a family-focused intervention may aim to:

- support a healthy and positive connection between (at least one) parent and child,
- support parents to reduce conflict where safe, and strengthen their networks of support,
- provide the family with practical support, including connecting them with other services,
- provide psychoeducation to support a shared understanding of risk, protection, and children’s developmental needs,
- be flexible in working with a family based on their needs and wants, and where they’re at.

Parents may also need help to support their children through an invention that has potential to be confusing or upsetting for a child or young person, even when there are protective concerns. This is something that should be explored with sensitivity and with a focus on empowering parents in their role.

### Child protection investigations can bring up complex emotions for parents

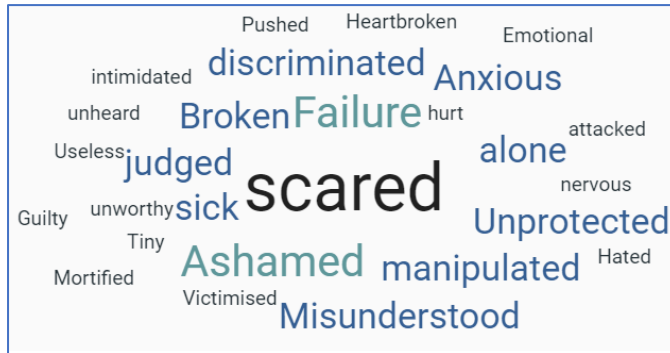
It is normal for parents to experience complex emotions when they are part of a statutory child protection investigation. Many parents deeply fear the threat of separation from their child<sup>3</sup> (whether this is likely to happen due to the investigation or not). This fear, in combination with other emotions

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare; University of Melbourne. (2020). A literature review of parent engagement and participation approaches in child protection: The Voice of Parents: A model for inclusion project in partnership with the University of Melbourne. Retrieved from: <https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-Centre-Voice-of-Parents-Literature-Review.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>Department of Health and Human Services, (2022). Child Protection Manual. Retrieved from: <https://www.cpmanual.vic.gov.au/>  
<sup>3</sup>Hinton, T. (2013). Parents in the child protection system. In. Hinton, T. (2013). Hobart: Anglicare Tasmania. Retrieved from: <http://anglicare-tas.org.au/docs/research/parents-in-the-child-protection-system-research-report.pdf>

that can arise, may show up in a variety of ways, and can affect how parents engage with practitioners, or how practitioners engage with parents. Hold in mind that this fear may also play a role in parents' reluctance to seek early help prior to a child protection investigation; practitioners should provide clarity to parents about the reality of this occurring as much as possible.

When asked about their first contact with child protection, the parents we worked with shared their feelings below:



Identifying how these emotions can manifest in different people, and being able to attend to presentations of these feelings, are skills that will help practitioners to build relationships and support parent engagement during a child protection investigation. Enquiring, acknowledging, validating and supporting the experiences of parents subject to an investigation can help to minimise barriers to engagement. Show parents that you understand that

your presence can have a major impact in their life, and that this can be disruptive and even intimidating for both parents and their children.

The potential for these emotions to be present also highlights the role of trauma-informed practice in an investigation. Practitioners can have better success engaging with parents when they are sensitive to the impact of stress and trauma, and how this might be part of the engagement, especially at the start. For some parents, a child protection investigation can be a traumatic event that may affect their:

- capacity to comprehend the situation,
- ability to regulate their emotions,
- physical and mental wellbeing, and
- capacity to make careful, informed decisions.

Poor support for parents experiencing high stress during this process also risks unintended consequences that have the potential to aggravate original concerns of risk to a child, including:

- difficulty with mood, such as irritability or anger,
- withdrawal from friends and family,
- increased use of substances to cope, and
- self-harm or self-destructive behaviour<sup>4</sup>.

### Acknowledge the parent's role as the expert in their lives and as important members of the family

Parents with lived experience of child protection contact told us that they want to be understood as a whole person, and as an important part of their child's life. Parents have expertise in their own lives and in the life of their family; they are best placed to contribute to the full picture of what is happening at the time of an investigation. (See the Voice of Parents' infographic *Understanding the child: Using the expertise of professionals, parents, and children* for further explanation of this concept.) Space needs to be actively created for parents to feel comfortable participating and contributing their expertise to the engagement. Practitioners can additionally facilitate this by being a consistent and supportive presence throughout the engagement.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Government Department of Health, (2021). *Stress*. Retrieved from <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/stress>

Parents resisted the idea that they could be seen as separate to their children, strongly advocating for recognition of the whole-of-family dynamic and family system as most important. They wanted support that could help the whole family, together. Where safe and possible, engage both parents in an investigation that involves their child, as well as any other important people, recognising and building on the strengths of the parents and the family as a whole (being mindful that ‘family’ and ‘good parenting’ may mean different things to different people).

This, along with meaningfully including parents in decision-making processes, can help to build trust and connection between professionals and families.

For a deeper understanding of how family dynamics, environments and broader social structures influence child wellbeing through the mechanism of parenting, consider where it may be useful to upskill on:

- Bowen’s family systems theory, which considers the family unit as a complex social system, through which members interact to influence each other’s behaviour.<sup>1</sup>
- Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, where child development is viewed as a complex system of relationships affected by many broader levels of their environment.<sup>2</sup>

1. Watson, W.H., (2012). Family Systems Theory, In V.S. Ramachandran (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Human Behaviour (Second Edition)*, (pp.184-193), Academic Press.

2. Bronfenbrenner, U., *Ecological models of human development*, in *International Encyclopedia of Education, Vol. 3, 2nd. Ed.* 1994, Elsevier: Oxford.

## Build trusting relationships as a priority

Building trusting relationships with parents is a first step to their effective engagement. In a child protection investigation, this relationship should take a partnership approach where possible, encouraging and enabling sustainable change, while always being clear about child safety as the bottom line<sup>5</sup>.

Practice from a place of empathy, curiosity and unconditional positive regard.

This relationship can be tricky to establish due to the involuntary nature of child protection involvement. Parents may naturally be reluctant to engage, and they may feel powerless and without agency unless proactive efforts for their inclusion are made by professionals. The relationship can be further complicated by the fact that the system is not well designed to accommodate diversity, even though many families have multiple and complex needs that make engagement difficult (e.g., cultural and language diversity, different parenting practices and family structures, disability, experiences of family violence, practical barriers and more.).

Research that identifies strategies for engaging birth parents suggests practitioners should be<sup>6</sup>:

- flexible and accommodating of parent needs,
- respectful to parents, modelling this in front of children,
- supportive of practical needs,
- non-judgemental and strengths-based,
- welcoming of collaboration, including from independent supports,
- clear and transparent about the role and expectations of the engagement,

<sup>5</sup>NSW Government Family and Community Services (2013). Module 3 Engaging with parents, families, children and young people: Learner workbook. Retrieved from <https://www.childabuserovalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/STAT.1050.001.0275.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>Parenting Research Centre (2017). Engagement of birth parents involved in the Child protection system: A scoping review of frameworks, policies, and practice guides. Melbourne, Australia. Report prepared for the NSW Department of Family and Community Services.

- available for guidance and follow up contact to provide clarification or further information.

Research also shows that engagement is supported by appropriately resourcing agencies, including staff support, having an organisational culture that supports engagement, streamlining service provision, ensuring staff have enough time to build relationships and ensuring culturally appropriate practices are embedded.<sup>7</sup>

### Dedicate time to developing a shared understanding of risk and parent experience

We heard from parents with lived experience of child protection contact that they did not always agree with the practitioners' assessment of what was happening in their family. There were many reasons why parents felt like this, for example, not feeling listened to or consulted about their version of events, feeling like case notes or information from other people was prioritised, and feeling like practitioners didn't take the time to explain what was happening or verify information they'd been given.

Professionals approach a child protection investigation with a particular risk-based lens. This will not necessarily be how parents see themselves and their family, so it is important that time is dedicated to developing a shared understanding of the risk concerns for the child or children. Parents are likely to need time to consider what may be an alternative perspective of their lives; deeply listening to their thoughts on their own experience of parenting and family life, and showing that you understand, may help to facilitate a mutual understanding.

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***An important consideration when working with individuals is that people progress through the different stages [of change] at their own rate. Expecting behaviour to change and actions to occur before an individual is at the appropriate stage can be counterproductive. Awareness of where a client is positioned...can assist with case planning, pinpoint actions you might undertake and identify realistic goals or tasks<sup>8</sup>.***

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This means that practitioners need to create space for parents' stories and voices to be heard in a genuine way. Approach these conversations with time, sensitivity, curiosity, and an open mind, recognising that you have only some elements of the story through a report. Parents may need some warning to prepare for this conversation (i.e. to tell you their story which likely includes trauma), and they may require options (e.g., to stop if distressed and return to it later). Practitioners can support parents' willingness to share this information by establishing a comfortable and safe relationship and environment as much as possible, and being flexible in how this conversation is had.

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<sup>7</sup>Parenting Research Centre (2017). Engagement of birth parents involved in the Child protection system: A scoping review of frameworks, policies, and practice guides. Melbourne, Australia. Report prepared for the NSW Department of Family and Community Services.

<sup>8</sup>NSW Government Family and Community Services (2013). Module 3 Engaging with parents, families, children and young people: Learner workbook. Retrieved from <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/STAT.1050.001.0275.pdf>

Make an effort to understand the experience of both parents where possible, as well as the child or children. Be mindful of the potential and additional trauma that can occur when someone is re-telling their story and provide options for parents to share this. For example, they might want to provide a written account of significant events, a timeline, or a video. Consider where consent to share this with other services might facilitate a reduction in re-telling their story. Ensure parents know what information you may be compelled to share with other agencies due to information sharing provisions or reporting obligations, allowing parents to make informed decisions about what they share and what the expected consequences may be.

Child protection guidelines ask practitioners to consider the presence of strengths and protective factors in parents and families. Practitioners could reflect on the utility of sharing these factors explicitly with parents; this may help parents to understand child protection's markers of "good enough" parenting, what parents can do to demonstrate change, and what is expected of them in the engagement. Some examples<sup>1</sup> may include:

- Do the parents acknowledge the concerns held by child protection?
- Are the parents actively engaged with support services?
- Is there a sufficient support network (family, professionals, community) to increase the child's safety?
- Is there evidence of one or more protective factors? Do these protective factors outweigh the risk factors?
- Is there evidence of one or more strengths (not yet sufficient or sustained to be considered protective factors)? Can these strengths be built on to achieve change?

1. These questions are drawn from the DFFH [Infant Response and Decision Tool](#).

## Establish a clear and transparent exchange of information that includes deeply listening to parents

Good communication is a crucial element of effective engagement. When engaging with services, parents need ongoing clarity of information that is both accessible and culturally appropriate. This should also be integrated with a regular confirmation of understanding, recognising that many parents will not feel comfortable to let you know that they haven't understood.

The parents we worked with told us, universally, that they did not have enough information throughout their engagement and that they did not get answers to questions that they had. This excludes parents from participating and can contribute to a breakdown in the working relationship. Parents felt that their practitioners were difficult to access during the investigation and this limited their ability to receive clarity or further information when needed. Consider a conversation that establishes these expectations from the outset, providing parents with clarity around when and how they can contact you, and where else they can go for information when you are not available. This may involve the need to advocate for new, accessible information and resources to be created.

Help parents to know their rights to legal support as soon as possible, and how you can help to connect them. Access to legal support can help parents to understand what is happening, to know what their rights are, and to know what to expect.

This may need to be done in conjunction with a sensitive conversation about the potential for legal support to introduce an adversarial element to your relationship. Emphasise that you want to work in positive partnership as much as possible to achieve the best outcome for their child, and help parents to build confidence that you are transparent and can be trusted as a source of information (while being clear that you cannot provide legal advice but can connect parents to this support).

As well as providing information about the process and decisions being made, practitioners should be clear about the purpose of the intervention, including the evidence of risk (this conversation should be ongoing throughout the engagement). Try to be as transparent as possible while also being kind. Invite parents to participate in this conversation and ask for their perception of the situation. Keep in mind that it may take some time for all parties to reach the point of shared understanding about potential risks to

the child/ren. Let parents know that they can take notes of your conversations and that you'll be taking notes too, which can be made available to them. If your organisational policy prohibits this, ensure that parents are aware that this is the case and advise them of their alternative options (e.g., taking their own notes, having a support person take notes, whether recording the conversation is allowed). Provide useful information as early as possible, and in multiple forms to ensure inclusivity and accessibility for parents.

We heard from parents that engagement with services can be more effective when they are given guidance on processes, and when they have access to independent support who can help them to advocate for themselves. Help parents to understand what is and isn't appropriate in the engagement and what kind of support they can access throughout an investigation.

### Be careful not to limit parent participation due to system issues

Parents need support that reduces the practical and systemic barriers to their engagement. These barriers are identified in research<sup>9</sup>, and their limiting effects were discussed by the parents that we worked with. Two major system barriers to parental participation identified include:

- dealing with multiple professionals,
- time constraints.

Parent engagement can be severely impacted by turnover of staff and requirements to work with various siloed services and professionals. We heard from parents with lived experience that the high turnover of staff can cause backsliding in their work with professionals, due to their need to re-engage, re-tell their stories, re-establish goals and ways of working, and re-negotiate power in the relationship. Parents can find it draining to continuously facilitate rapport between new workers and their children, and to manage the potential impact of this disruption in their families. Overall, parents told us that this

The Parent Advisory Group suggested that staff turnover impacts could be mitigated by parent involvement in a handover between workers, to ensure a shared understanding of the family and a continuation of the goals can be achieved. This may also support the establishing of the new working relationships for parents.

process could be 'exhausting', on top of a potentially difficult service engagement where their involvement is involuntary. Research shows that worker turnover can additionally contribute to delayed decision-making and affect parents' motivation to remain engaged due to reduced hope for a positive resolution. We also heard that parents felt their progress could be missed in the handover of information between professionals they worked with.

Time constraints on workers and the limited flexibility of processes also significantly impacts parent participation opportunities. Workers in child protection are often under pressure with high caseloads and a work environment that requires prescriptive and rigid practice to comply with legal requirements that underpin practice, and high volumes of paperwork. This can limit time spent with parents to effectively engage and enable their participation during a crucial, potentially life-changing processes.

As a UK guide for good practice in protecting children<sup>10</sup> states:

<sup>9</sup>Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare; University of Melbourne. (2020). A literature review of parent engagement and participation approaches in child protection: The Voice of Parents: A model for inclusion project in partnership with the University of Melbourne. Retrieved from: <https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-Centre-Voice-of-Parents-Literature-Review.pdf>

<sup>10</sup>Family Rights Group. (2020). Delivering good practice initial assessments of family and friends carers in the context of COVID-19. Retrieved from <https://frg.org.uk/product/initial-family-and-friends-care-assessment-a-good-practice-guide-2/>



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*“These are life changing and life-defining decisions for the child or children and other family members and they cannot be rushed. The importance of exploring all the available options [in an initial assessment] cannot be overstated.”*

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