

# Voice of Parents: A Model for Inclusion

Hearing the lived experience of birth parents



# Acknowledgement of Country

- The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare would like to acknowledge and pay respect to the past, present, and emerging traditional custodians and Elders of this country on which we work.
- The Centre also acknowledges the injustices and trauma suffered as a result of European settlement, the stolen generations, and other policies such as the forced removal of children from their families, communities, culture and land.
- We respect the resilience of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in the face of this trauma and respect their right to, and aspiration for, self-determination and empowerment.



# Voice of Parents: a Model for Inclusion

The Voice of Parents project has a two-year duration and is made possible through support from Gandel Foundation and Equity Trustees - the Arthur Gordon Oldham Charitable Trust.

The Centre is leading the development of evidence and lived experience-informed systemic approach to parent participation.

The project deliverables include:

- Charter of Parental Participation and Principles
- Parent Participation Model and resource toolkit.

The Voice of Parents is a unique approach that has now received government investment to provide the opportunity to embed this critical function at the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

# The importance of parental participation and engagement

A child will do best being raised in the care of their family, wherever possible and appropriate



Parents who are meaningfully engaged can participate more effectively in child protection processes and child and family services.



This leads to improved outcomes for children, young people and families.



# Hearing from lived experience

These findings outline:

- **What we did...** a summary of our approach
- **Who we worked with...** a Parent Advisory Group (PAG)
- **What we heard...** lived experience insights
- **What we discovered...** design considerations and themes of meaningful engagement with parents

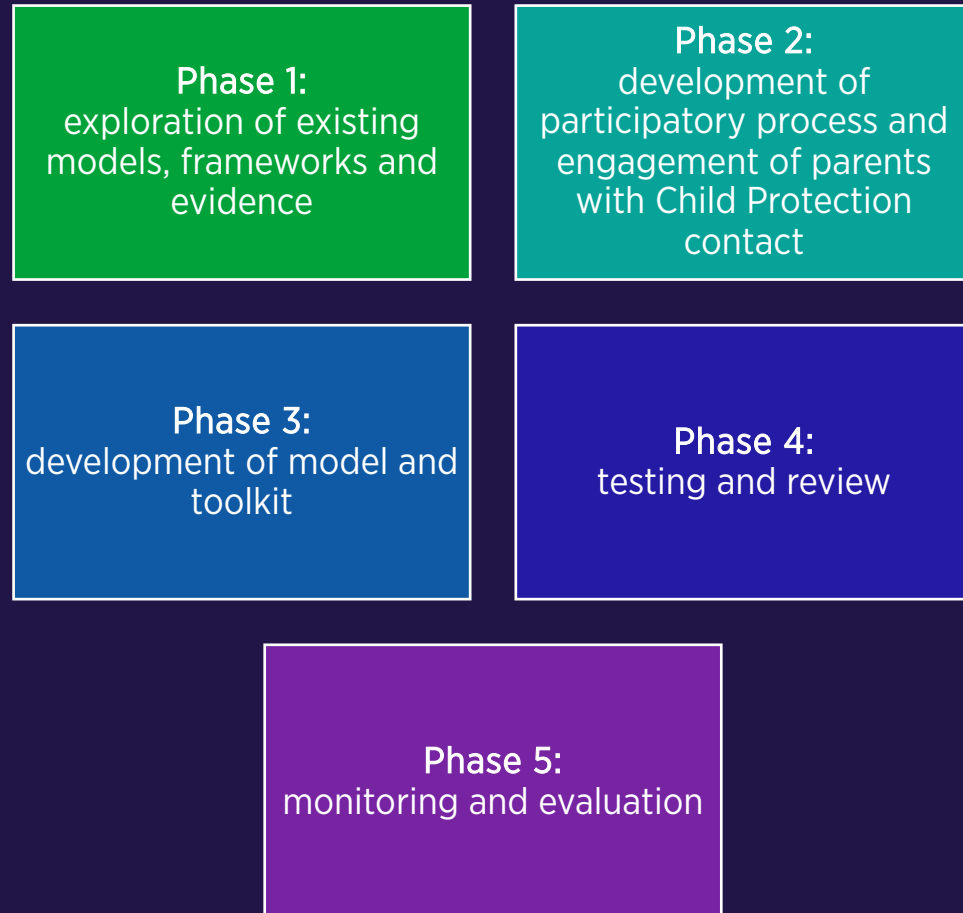
The insights and themes generated in this findings overview should be considered alongside our **Voice of Parents: A model for Inclusion: Supporting participation of birth parents** report, which outlines Guiding Participation Principles and an effective engagement approach including recruiting, onboarding and working with parents.

Professionals aiming to support and engage parents, as well as those working towards designing and improving systems and services, are encouraged to consider the Voice of Parent project findings.

By sharing these findings, the Voice of Parents aims to support policy and practice that improves outcomes for families and increases the safety and wellbeing of children and young people in Victoria.



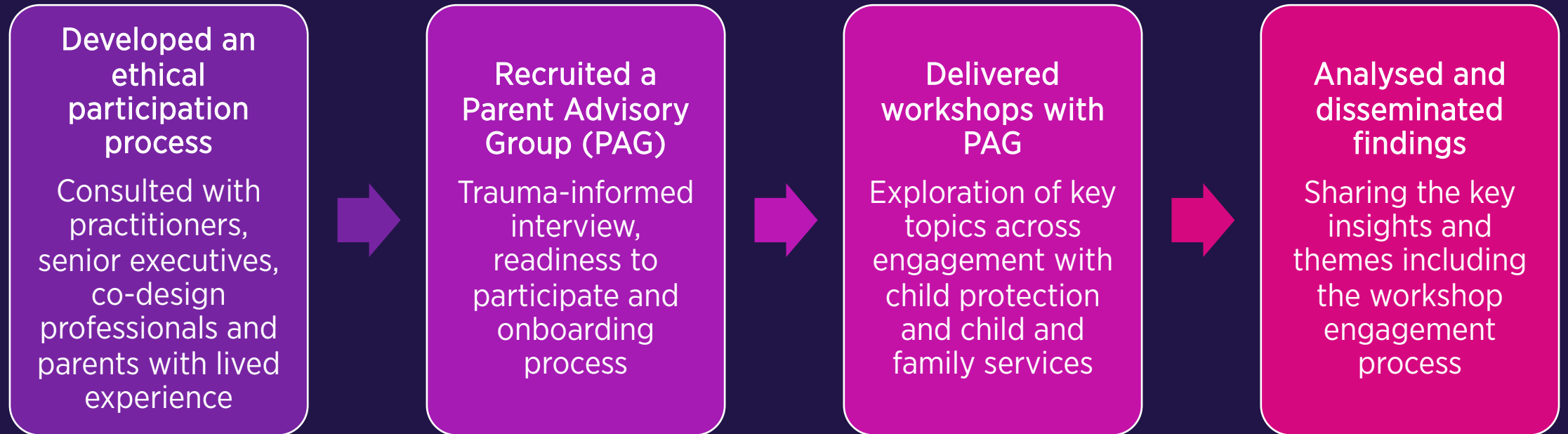
# Drawing on learnings across phases enables fit-for-purpose engagement approaches



Phase 1 explored what we've learned from research, the sector, government frameworks, and experts.

This helped to provide a base for the Phase 2 of the project, developing and engaging parents through an ethical participatory process.

# What we did...



Detailed processes relating to recruitment, onboarding and workshop design are outlined in **Voice of Parents: A model for Inclusion: Supporting participation of birth parents.**

# Exploring system touchpoints with the Parent Advisory Group

## Workshop 1

Project overview and scope, forming of group and agreement setting

## Workshop 2

Participant storytelling focusing on lived experiences, being heard or engaged by services

## Workshop 3

Early engagement with child protection or other services, focusing on parents as people and how to tell their stories to services, drafting of Charter of Parental Participation

## Workshop 4

Charter of Parent Participation, focusing on engagement with child protection, child removal and workforce

## Workshop 5

What does a good meeting look like? Focusing on bonding and support for parents, reunification and working with non-statutory services

## Workshop 6

Meaningful engagement and services working better together, focusing on experiences of court, difficult conversations with workers, access visits and ideas for toolkit

## Workshop 7

Speaking the “language” of child protection, inclusion of fathers, tips for other parents and what is the most important thing you want us to know?

## Workshop 8

Review progress, Charter of Parent Participation draft, ideas for the model and the resources. Participant and project feedback, next steps



# Workshop insights

“When you’re working in that space with children and families, the decisions that come out are life long and lasting. The impact goes on and on so it’s critical that parents are heard in that process.”

– PAG member

INSIGHT 1: Build trust and a shared understanding in initial engagement	INSIGHT 2: Manage complex emotions and expectations in a child protection investigation	INSIGHT 3: Make parents feel welcome and like equal participants in meetings	INSIGHT 4: Parental grief, loss and disconnection from their child while not in their care
<b>Flexibility</b> - create safe spaces where parents are part of exploring solution-focused supports.	<b>Shared understand of risk</b> – listen to parents’ perspectives and dedicate time to developing a shared understanding of risk to the child.	<b>Safe spaces</b> – create safe spaces for meeting parents where they are.	<b>Support grief and loss</b> – parents may need significant support for grief and loss to stay engaged after a child removal.
<b>Early help</b> - engage parents early and effectively to help build trust and connection.	<b>Family as a whole</b> – work with parents to create a holistic picture of the family and identify solutions for parents to have a healthy connection with their child.	<b>Equalise power imbalances</b> – help parents to feel welcomed and included in meetings.	<b>Validate feelings</b> - acknowledge and validate these feelings, and work with parents to identify culturally safe support.
<b>Deep listening</b> - establish an ongoing dialogue that is warm and non-judgmental to enable communication and information exchange.	<b>Awareness of parenting practices</b> – understand that culture and customs plays a role to child raising practices, especially within Aboriginal families.	<b>Practical support</b> – reduce barriers to participation by scheduling meetings when parents are available and in neutral locations.	<b>Promote connection</b> – support parents to stay in healthy connection with their children while not in their care (when it is safe to do so).
<b>Unconditional positive regard</b> – facilitate positive engagement through practice that is warm, reliable, consistent and responsive.	<b>Validate feelings</b> – acknowledge and support the experience of parents subject to investigation to minimise barriers to engagement.	<b>Deep listening</b> – show parents that their voice is being listened to and included in decisions.	<b>Provide clarity</b> – help parents to know how and when they can stay connected to their child, and what support they can access to do so.
<b>Equalise power imbalances</b> – create a partnership where parents feel included and welcomed into decision-making processes.	<b>Recognise strengths</b> – include parent and family strengths and work with parents to build on these skills.	<b>Provide clarity</b> – being clear about meeting goals, agendas and expected outcomes, can facilitate parent participation.	<b>Promote hope</b> – parents can lose morale and disengage when processes are slow and subject to changes. A clear pathway forward to reunification can help.
<b>Good communication</b> – provide clarity about the purpose of service engagement and keep this conversation open to build trust and transparency.	<b>Create space</b> – invite and welcome parents into decision-making processes about their families to build a sense of partnership.	<b>Independent support</b> – parents may find it easier to participate with a support person present who is welcomed into the process.	<b>Create space</b> – help parents to stay involved in information exchange and decisions, even when their child is not in their care.
<b>Validate feelings</b> – acknowledge the impact of an intervention that can feel disruptive or intimidating.	<b>Trauma-informed</b> – be conscious of the impact of trauma or high stress on parents’ capacity to process what is happening.	<b>Practice good record keeping</b> – confirm who will take notes and ensure these are shared with parents after a meeting to support their inclusion.	<b>Provide guidance</b> – help parents to best support their children during this time.
<b>Respect</b> – treat parents with respect and role model this in front of children.	<b>Be available</b> – support engagement by being available for clarification or further information.	<b>Respect</b> – parents feel more able to engage when workers are calm, respectful, use plain language and check in on parents’ understanding.	
<b>Practical support</b> – help to reduce practical barriers to engagement to facilitate participation.	<b>Provide clarity</b> – transparency of processes and decisions can build trust and connection.	<b>Be available</b> – support engagement by being available for clarification or further information after a meeting, and welcome feedback from parents.	

INSIGHT 5: Keeping families connected supports participation in access visits	INSIGHT 6: Early access to legal support helps	INSIGHT 7: Reunification processes are long and risk parent disengagement	INSIGHT 8: How parents listened to and included by services
<b>Promote access</b> – help parents to stay connected with their child through frequent and organic access visit opportunities.	<b>Access to support</b> – early engagement with legal support and advocacy meant better outcomes for parents.	<b>Consistency</b> – recognise the importance of consistency in case plan goals to preserve parents’ hope for progress and resolution.	<b>Early help</b> – engaging parents early and effectively supports their participation in services.
<b>Promote connection</b> – support parents to be involved in decisions around access visits and identify solutions for healthy parent-child connection.	<b>Understanding</b> – helping parents to feel understood and supported through a vulnerable and overwhelming experience can support their participation.	<b>Support for system impacts</b> – help to mitigate the impacts of system issues on parent engagement (ex: delayed processes due to COVID-19).	<b>Be aware</b> – recognise that when support occurs too late for a family, it can have significant consequences.
<b>Flexibility</b> – accommodating parent/child preference for visit locations and settings can reduce distress and increase participation.	<b>Provide clarity</b> – support parents to understand court processes and language used so they can access opportunities for full participation.	<b>Recognise strengths and progress</b> – parents can be motivated to remain engaged through recognition of their strengths and progress made throughout the reunification process.	<b>Create space</b> – work with parents to identify needs and wants of the family, and to connect them with support.
<b>Create space</b> – help parents to access opportunities to connect with their child in a healthy, positive way by minimising oversight and judgement (where safe).	<b>Create space</b> – be explicit in welcoming parent input into decisions being made about their family.	<b>Support grief and loss</b> – continued support for grief and loss may still be needed through this stage of engagement.	<b>Independent support</b> - independent advocates or support people can help parents to engage and navigate the system in a timely fashion.
<b>Consistency</b> – parent engagement and connection with their child can be supported by minimising inconsistencies in visit arrangements (ex: due to worker turnover or other issues).	<b>Build trust and relationships</b> – investment of time and resources are part of facilitating parent engagement and participation.	<b>Provide guidance</b> – parents want to know how they can best support their child(ren) through separation, with support that is culturally safe.	<b>Support for system impacts</b> – identify solutions for parent participation and inclusion options that are affected by time pressures on workers.
<b>Practical support</b> – help parents to overcome practical barriers to participation, such as affording public transport.	<b>Deeply listen</b> – deeply listening to a parent’s voice can help to build trust and encourage participation. Consider how this can be done in short engagements (ex: with duty lawyers).	<b>Check for updates</b> – ensure records of parent circumstances are up-to-date to identify changes and support participation.	<b>Deep listening</b> – deep listening to parents’ stories, while supporting them to not have to repeat it again and again, can help parents to feel heard and understood by services.
<b>Independent support</b> – parents can feel more comfortable with a support person present.	<b>Promote hope</b> - Help parents to keep up morale and stay connected with their child during court processes that are slow or subject to delays.	<b>Provide clarity</b> – help parents to remain informed and contribute to decisions being made about their child to build trust, increase engagement, and support the parent-child connection.	<b>Invite feedback</b> - increased options for providing genuine feedback that does not risk judgement will help to facilitate the voice of parents in services.
<b>Provide guidance</b> – the supervised nature of visits can be leave parents unsure of how to engage with their children, especially when they know notes are being taken for court-related purposes.	<b>Independent support</b> – welcome a third-party advocate into the process to help parents feel more comfortable and confident to participate.		
<b>Support sibling access</b> – help parents to plan for how this can be facilitated.			

INSIGHT 9: Participation is facilitated by positive and consistent relationships with staff	INSIGHT 10: Participation is supported by access to information	INSIGHT 11: Parents need increased access to plain language child protection information	INSIGHT 12: Increased participation of fathers is needed	INSIGHT 13: Parents may pursue a deeper understanding of their experience and feel motivated to help other parents
<p><b>Support for system impacts</b> - identify solutions that minimise the disruption of engagement caused by staff turnover (for parents and children).</p>	<p><b>Access to information</b> – help parents to navigate the critical gap in available information, while centralised information on engaging with services, particularly CP, does not currently exist.</p>	<p><b>Accessible information</b> – help parents to navigate the significant language gap between sector and clients in available information. Parents want access to information that makes sense to them, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What key processes and terms are called and what they mean</li> <li>• What parents can expect and what is expected of them</li> <li>• What their rights are</li> <li>• Where they can go for support.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Family as a whole</b> – facilitate engagement of both parents (and other important people to the child) where possible and safe. Discussions of family context and preferences should be had to ensure engaging both parents does not compromise one parent’s safety.</p>	<p><b>Deeper understanding</b> - many of the PAG continued to pursue information through study after their engagement with the child and family service system.</p>
<p><b>Be aware</b> – understand that when parents have a new worker, they need to dedicate more time to building rapport and re-engaging, re-telling their story, re-establishing goals and re-negotiating power in the relationship.</p>	<p><b>Risk of bias</b> – help parents to access information that is from trusted sources, minimising risk of accessing information that is inaccurate, biased, or unhelpful.</p>	<p><b>Advocate</b> – advocate for more plain language information to support parents in navigating an engagement with child protection.</p>	<p><b>Be proactive</b> – help fathers to become more involved in engagements that concern their families or child. Proactive attempts to involve fathers can support engagement (for example, looking to strengths-based practice, encouraging the fathering role, strengthening parenting capacity).</p>	<p><b>Further study</b> - a number of parents engaged in further studies in related industries, obtaining certifications in areas such as community services, social work, counselling, alcohol and other drug, and disability.</p>
<p><b>Handover options</b> – parents were interested in options for their involvement in a handover between workers to facilitate the new relationship and consistency of goals.</p>	<p><b>Tailor information</b> - explore parent needs and preferences in how they receive information to support their full participation.</p>	<p><b>Inclusive</b> – help to include parents and minimise power imbalances by providing information that is clear, jargon-free and not overly professional or bureaucratic.</p>	<p><b>Support for fathers</b> – fathers can lack the opportunity to receive support from services when not proactively engaged</p>	<p><b>Motivation</b> - parents identified this as a way to better understand what they had been through, and it represented their motivation to contribute to other families going through similar experiences.</p>
<p><b>Consistency</b> – recognise the importance of consistency in case plans and goals across different workers to preserve parent engagement.</p>	<p><b>Accessible and culturally appropriate</b> – provide parents with accessible and culturally appropriate information about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging with services</li> <li>• Navigating the system</li> <li>• Significant processes</li> <li>• Key terms</li> <li>• Where they can go for answers.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Confirm understanding</b> – check for understanding when discussing CP and court-related processes and offer plain language explanations to build trust and comprehension.</p>	<p><b>Awareness of bias</b> – be mindful of gender biases that might exist in engagement about children and making proactive attempts to overcome these.</p>	<p><b>Embedding parent voices</b> - looking for opportunities to re-engage with parents who are no long clients for feedback, or through the design and development of services, can lay the groundwork for parent voices to be embedded across organisations.</p>
<p><b>Recognise and record progress</b> – parents can be encouraged to remain engaged when their progress is captured and recognised by new workers.</p>	<p><b>Trauma-informed</b> – help parents to take in information by being sensitive to the impact of any stress and trauma they have experienced (current and historical) and pacing the provision of information.</p>	<p><b>Independent support</b> – parents can feel more comfortable and confident to participate with access to a support person that can mediate or translate professional language (for example, a peer advocate).</p>	<p><b>Equality of parenting responsibilities</b> – help parents to feel that mothers and fathers are held to equal standards by services supporting a child.</p>	
<p><b>Invite feedback</b> - creating opportunities for feedback and changes to be made when relationships are not functional can help to support parents’ agency and strengthen relationships overall.</p>	<p><b>Confirm understanding</b> – repeated attempts to confirm for understanding can support parent participation and engagement.</p>		<p><b>Equality of individual responsibilities</b> - support parents who may also be victims of abuse and neglect and ensure they are not held responsible for the abusive behaviour of the other parent (for example, holding a mother responsible for family violence victimisation).</p>	
	<p><b>Advocate</b> – for more plain language and accessible information to be created and provided to parents engaging with services.</p>		<p><b>Community support for families</b> - help mothers to see themselves as part of a network of people that can support them in the parenting role.</p>	

# Analysis in summary:

## Practice to strengthen parental engagement

- **Provide clarity.** Parents need accessible and culturally safe information to understand processes that affect them and to know how and when they can contribute to decisions being made about their family. Clarity about roles, expectations and goals can help to increase parent engagement and facilitate participation.
- **Independent support.** Parents can feel more comfortable with a support person present; a welcoming environment facilitates their inclusion and supports parent engagement through improved comprehension, increased confidence in sharing their voice, and timely system navigation.
- **Consistency.** Consistency of practice, support and availability helps to preserve parent engagement and promotes hope for a positive resolution. This can relate to case plans and goals, helping parents stay connected with their child, and worker availability.
- **Create space.** The inclusion of parents relies on professionals creating space for them to participate and explicitly inviting their input and expertise of lived experience.
- **Deep listening.** Show parents that their voice is being listened to; establish an ongoing dialogue and exchange of information that is warm and non-judgmental.
- **Validate feelings.** Acknowledge and validate parents' feelings to reduce barriers to engagement, and work with parents to identify culturally safe support where needed.



“It is very hard to find your voice when you’re feeling so disempowered and broken down from your identity. It feels very overpowering.”



“Sometimes I was provided with an awful lot of information ... it’s so much at a time when you are overwhelmed and vulnerable. You don’t have the ability to properly comprehend that.”



“I didn’t feel listened to or heard. I felt completely ignored. Whether I was nice or not nice didn’t help, it didn’t seem to help if I was cooperative.”

# Analysis in summary: Practice to strengthen parental engagement

- **Be aware.** Understand what the engagement experience can be like for parents and support them to overcome these barriers to participation (e.g. power imbalances, fear of child removal, late access to help).
- **Practical support.** Reduce barriers to parent participation that are practical in nature (e.g., by scheduling meetings when parents are available and in neutral locations, helping with transport, financial assistance to attend visits with their child).
- **Provide guidance.** Parents need guidance on how to navigate parts of the engagement and how to best support their children throughout (e.g., what they can and can't do, what is and isn't expected, what parenting practices might support their child through a family CP investigation).
- **Recognise strengths.** Acknowledge individual and family strengths, and work with parents to build on these skills. Acknowledge progress made throughout the engagement, and talk with parents about what can be compromised on and what is not negotiable.
- **Support for system impacts.** Identify solutions to disrupted or limited parent participation that are caused by systemic issues (e.g., minimising the disruption of engagement caused by staff turnover, mitigating the impact of process delays on the parent-child connection).



“There’s a real awareness that you are within a system that’s designed to have power over you. You are the recipient of expert advice and decisions but it’s not created for you to be an active participant no matter how much information has been given.”



“Access to an independent advocate or support person for parents is so important ... the relationship ... can be very volatile and emotional.”



“You’re concerned whether the new worker is on the same page as you. Having to put more energy into helping the kids re-engage and trust worker, [and understand] the direction the new worker wants to take.”

# Design considerations and themes of meaningful parental engagement

“Not everybody is textbook. People’s needs and wants are different so it’s important to listen.”

– PAG member



# Design considerations to inform policy and reform

## Guiding principles

- Draw on the guiding principles identified in **Hearing from the Voices of Parents: Supporting engagement through participatory processes** to support participation of parents that is ethical, meaningful, and genuine.

## Family-focused approach to service design and delivery

- Expand on the child protection child-focused approach to support a family-focused approach.
- Practice enablers are used by all services who work with families involved in the child protection system.

## Backbone support for participation and engagement

- Backbone support within services is necessary to enable parents to engage and participate.
- This means that systems and organisations working with families need to:
  - be prepared and values-driven to include parent voices,
  - commit to capacity building and resourcing to facilitate this inclusion.

## Quality control

- Consistent application of the model and principles of meaningful engagement is needed. Every parent and family should have equal access to best practice.
- The Centre can provide support to organisations implementing the model and contribute to ongoing knowledge building and sharing.

These design considerations aim to support better outcomes for children and young people via increased parental engagement with services.



# Six enabling themes for meaningful parent participation and engagement



These themes form the foundation of the parent participation model. Initial testing and review of these enablers has been undertaken, and ongoing improvements will be trialled throughout the development of the model.

Initial testing and review by:

- Senior Reference Group
- Parent Advisory Group
- Sector professionals

# The six parental participation enablers are:

## Respect and recognition

- When we engage with parents with respect and recognise their experience, progress and motivation, we help parents to feel safe, comfortable and seen. This helps to strengthen their relationship with services.
- This is essential for parents to engage with services in a meaningful way.

## Advocacy and guidance

- Advocacy and guidance can look different for each family depending on their unique needs and wants.
- This can come from informal networks of family or chosen family, friends and peers, or from professional assistance that is inclusive, accessible and ideally long-term.

## Building relationships

- The relationship between parents and professionals is strengthened when engagement builds trust, increases feelings of safety, and reduces power imbalances.
- Active steps to include parents, as well as children and other significant family members, that are time-sensitive and responsive can contribute to a sense of partnership.

## Empowering parents

- When we support parents to see themselves as experts in their own lived experience and as experts in their child's life, we empower parents to have a voice in processes that affect their family.
- Creating space for their input and addressing practical barriers can improve participation.

## Access to information

- All parents have the right to accessible, transparent and timely information that is regularly shared and to have information they share heard.
- When we routinely confirm that information is understood, we help support meaningful engagement and build trust.

## Connection and identity

- Supporting parents to have a healthy connection with their child can be critical for the child's wellbeing and development, even if they are not living in their parent's care (unless this compromises the child's safety.)
- A child's connection to their family and cultural remains important throughout the lifespan and should be strengthened at every opportunity.

Meaningful engagement of parents is a mechanism for services to increase child safety and wellbeing within their family of origin.

# Hearing from parents

“I’m most proud of...allowing myself to be vulnerable to share my story on an amazing project knowing that I’m part of a team that is paving the way for other parents voices to be heard.”

– PAG member



**Parents have recognised and praised the transformative impacts of their participation in this work**



*Click the image above to watch the video*

# 2022 release of the Model and Toolkit

- The Model, framework and Toolkit will be tested with practitioners across key sites.
- The parents involved in this project continue to be highly engaged and are valued for their expertise and guidance.
- Future opportunities for engaging parents with lived experience in sector consultation and co-design is recommended. Many parents expressed interest in participating in this project, and all noted their limited opportunities for providing feedback elsewhere. The Centre continues to explore options for increasing the scope and membership of the original PAG and drawing on their expertise and insights.



Voice of  
parents



# Thank you!

- The Parent Advisors
- The Voice of Parents' Senior Reference Group
- Parents expressing interest in future participation activities
- Helen Makregiorgos, Victoria Legal Aid
- Lydia Trowse and Kerry Hawkins, Emerging Minds for consultations
- Leanne Claussen, Parents on a Mission
- Gandel Foundation and Equity Trustees - the Arthur Gordon Oldham Charitable Trust