



# *Stronger Together*

Executive  
Summary



## Stronger Together Executive Summary

This is a summary of Stronger Together: Strengthening families to improve outcomes for children. To download the full resource, please see the Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre website at <https://www.monash.edu/arts/gender-and-family-violence/research-and-projects/supporting-family-reunification-in-child-protection>

"The whole system needs an overhaul really."  
~ Grace, mother of 4

### Driving cultural change throughout Victoria's child protection system

The Victorian Government's *Roadmap for Reform* seeks to achieve unprecedented transformation of Victoria's child and family system (DHHS, 2016). The latest action plan, *Pathways to support children and families: 2021-2021 priority setting plan*, calls for a distinct reorientation of service provision to focus on improving family functioning and supporting children to remain safely in their homes (DFFH, 2021).

This ambitious policy presents a window of opportunity to reimagine the Victorian Child Protection system and generate an evidence-based and lasting transformation of the values and practices of Child Protection services.

The findings of this study point to the necessary next steps to achieve these goals. Prioritising child safety and wellbeing together with family functioning requires a service framework that is:

- Strengths-based
- Trauma and DFV informed
- Transparent
- Integrates cross-sector collaboration to facilitate tailored access to support and assist trauma recovery.

The experiences of mothers in this study indicate that parenting policies and services remain highly gendered in Australian society with mothers seen as having primary responsibility for child safety, wellbeing and development' (Meyer et al., 2018b).

## What is this study about?

This study centres on family reunification in the Victorian Child Protection system. The Children's Court of Victoria may make a Family Reunification Order where it determines a child is in need of protection and cannot safely stay in parental care. A Family Reunification Order gives parental responsibility for the child to Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

Amendments to the *Children Youth and Families Act 2005* in 2016 introduced a 12 month time limit, which may be extended for a further 12 months, for parents to achieve reunification with a child who has been removed from their care. These amendments were intended to ensure timely decision-making and provide safe and permanent homes for children within 24 months.

This report presents findings based on the experiences of mothers seeking the return of their children to their care within the Victorian Child Protection system and the community legal practitioners who assist and represent them. The research explores the issues mothers were asked to address when working towards reunification, their relationships with Child Protection caseworkers and any help mothers received from support services during the reunification process. All the mothers involved in this study were affected by domestic and family violence (DFV).

Thirty mothers were interviewed by phone for this study and a total of 13 community legal centre practitioners participated in three online focus groups. The research was carried out by the Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre in partnership with Women's Legal Service Victoria (WLSV). The research was funded by a Knowledge Grant from the Victoria Law Foundation.



## Mothers affected by DFV and Child Protection: Reunifying families and transforming the Victorian Child Protection system

Better outcomes for children and strong parent-child relationships are more likely to be achieved through collaborative relationships with client families and supporting parents to address protective concerns while families remain intact. As acknowledged in the *Roadmap* and an extensive body of research (Humphreys et al., 2020; Meyer et al., 2019; Mandel, 2013), this requires a holistic focus on children and parents/carers' support needs to facilitate targeted interventions and support better outcomes for children and families.

"I honestly felt that [Child Protection] wanted to actually keep [child's name] away from me. They weren't actually interested in working with me to get [child's name] back."  
~ Chloe, mother of 2

Our study suggests that in practice Victorian Child Protection services remain geared towards risk identification and management rather than supporting parents and carers to improve their capacity to care for children in a safe and secure way. The experiences of mothers in this study showed that Child Protection responses centred largely on children's protective needs without providing support for mothers to improve their parenting capacity and address other issues impacting their mental health and wellbeing, such as DFV. Assisting mothers to improve family functioning, thereby enabling children to remain safely at home remained secondary and at times invisible.

"The child is supported; the carers are supported.  
Everyone's supported but the mother is not supported."  
~ Sam, mother of 1

The study results lend strong support for immediate and authentic reorientation of the Victorian Child Protection system. The mothers and community legal centre practitioners involved in our research resoundingly called for change in Child Protection practice. We recommend a shift to a strengths-based model that mitigates child safety risks *and* supports families (particularly victim-survivor parents/carers) to strengthen parenting capacity and parent-child relationships, including where children cannot remain in, or be returned to, their parents' care.

Children affected by abuse and neglect, including experiences of DFV, often experience immediate and long-term adverse effects on their physical, emotional and social development. Having a healthy attachment to and strong bond with the victim-survivor parent (predominantly mothers) has been identified as a protective factor that supports children's short and long-term recovery (DFFH, 2021; Humphreys et al., 2015; Katz, 2015; Meyer et al., 2021). Supporting parents/carers affected by DFV and/or other risk factors to maintain safe and secure relationships with their children and develop appropriate parenting practices is therefore critical for children's safety, development and wellbeing.

## Embedding trauma and DFV informed practice

*"She [Child Protection caseworker] didn't really classify that the family violence was a big thing I had to pretend that I was ok with co-parenting there was family violence constantly."  
- Anne, mother of 2*

Recovery from DFV is complex and takes time. It is a long-term process that extends beyond the initial crisis response. The support and recovery needs of victim-survivors do not end when an abusive relationship or its immediate violence ends. Equally, the perpetrator's behaviour may shift over time and manifest in post-separation abuse. Recovery requires the identification of support needs and access to a range of services and support mechanisms, which vary for each victim-survivor child and parent.

The removal of children from parental care and placement in alternative care arrangements fails to address the underlying and ongoing impacts of DFV on victim-survivor parents and their children. Aligning with previous research evidence, this study shows mothers and children affected by DFV often have multiple and varying support needs and many services are under-resourced and have extensive waiting lists (Meyer & Stambe, 2020; Maher et al., 2020; Humphreys, Mullender, Thiara & Skamballis, 2006; Hooker, Toone & Raykar, 2019).

Where families are affected by DFV, Child Protection interventions need to take a holistic approach to meet the support needs of adult and child victim-survivors. This holistic approach should provide timely referrals to specialist supports services, comprehensive wrap around support to address trauma recovery needs and flexibility with reunification timeframes where this is in the child's best interests.

A responsive and flexible approach is required to support mothers and other carers to address protective concerns and be able to provide safe and secure home environments for their children. Greater attention to mitigating the risk to children in parental care is needed to reduce the number of children entering care services and enable children to be safely reunified with their family of origin.

Child Protection services is part of the Victorian child and family services system and broader Victorian social services sector. The COVID-19 pandemic has seen unprecedented demand on child and family services as well as family violence, health, housing, legal assistance and other services (DFFH, 2021). Child Protection alone cannot be held responsible for securing access to appropriate support services. Neither is it the responsibility of parents subject to Child Protection interventions who are actively working towards addressing protective concerns. Wider system availability and accountability along with flexible reunification timelines are required where service demand outstrips capacity and families require access to multiple and/or long-term support mechanisms, particularly trauma recovery services.

"One person, one worker. You can't chop and change workers; you've got to have one worker."  
~ Carmel, mother of 2

Where DFV is present in families involved in Child Protection, worker consistency is critical. Trauma, such as DFV, can complicate trust building. This study indicates that consistent communication and support is essential to engage parent survivors in Child Protection processes. Further, trauma informed practice must apply to children and families engaged with Child Protection. As recognised in the draft *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032*, recovery needs exist in adult as well as child victim-survivors of DFV and often requires long-term recovery support (DSS, 2022). It is critical for Child Protection work to align with broader national policies and address the ongoing recovery needs of children and their families. The benefits are multilayered and go beyond supporting parents towards providing safe and secure living arrangements for their children. Child-centred recovery support is critical in disrupting the cycle of violence, minimising the risk of victimisation in later life and perpetration of violence by children affected by DFV.

## Bringing abusive fathers back into carer arrangements

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"On the intervention order it's my name and both of my kids. And Child Protection told Children's Court that they have assessed [abusive ex-husband's name] and they find the kids to be safe around him."

- Anne, mother of 2

Children being placed in the care of the abusive parent was common for mothers in this study. While mothers were deemed unsafe or unable to care for their children due to concerns around mental health, AOD and/or other parenting issues, fathers with a documented history of DFV did not appear to face the same level of scrutiny. Where families involved in Child Protection are affected by DFV, Child Protection responses should include a focus on perpetrator visibility, engagement and accountability, including the short- and long-term impacts of the perpetrator's violent behaviour on affected family members. The placement of children in the (temporary) care of an abusive parent is likely to have significant negative effects on their social, emotional and physical wellbeing.



## Cross-sectorial integration to support trauma recovery

"I can understand women that have trouble getting their children home, especially within the timeframe of two years. My goodness. I was traumatised when they took [name of child]. I fell apart To pick yourself up from that and to try all on your own with no family support and no support from the people that have taken your son. Just told [by Child Protection], "This is what you've got to do. If you don't do it, you're not going to get your son home" is very, very difficult.  
- Rachel, mother of 1

This study highlights the importance of timely access to a range of specialist support services for child and adult victims of DFV. DFV victim-survivor children and parents are likely to require the support of a range of specialist and universal support services throughout their involvement with Child Protection, including legal services. DFV frequently co-occurs with parental mental health and/or problematic substance use in reports of child welfare risks, highlighting the need for holistic and therapeutic interventions (Conley Wright et al., 2021).

This study revealed that Child Protection interventions continue to remain siloed with different services addressing different risk factors. Cross-sector collaboration should involve targeted and timely referrals from Child Protection to relevant universal and specialist support services to ensure holistic and streamlined care for children and families affected by DFV. While the need for a more holistic approach to support provision and coordination is outlined in the *Roadmap*, practice responses remain siloed and cross-sector collaboration limited. The current study highlights the need for service sectors to develop and implement a common use of language, risk assessment practices and shared responsibilities around service provision and information sharing, also highlighted in other Australian research (cf. Macvean et al., 2018; Price-Robertson et al., 2020).

Where reports to Child Protection do not meet the threshold for further action, timely referral processes are required to facilitate access to meaningful early interventions that address clients' individual needs within a trauma and DFV-informed practice framework.





## Transparent communication and decision-making

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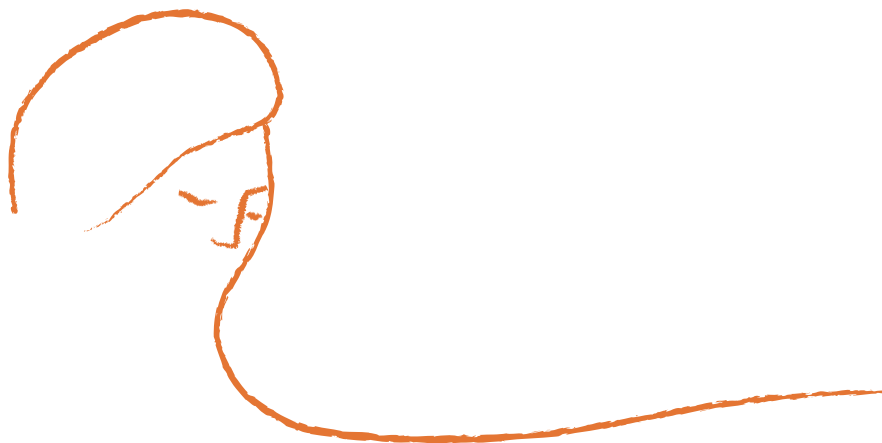
"I think [Child Protection] could have set out clear expectations or clear goals of what had to be done in order for me to get my daughter back into my care which they never, ever did...  
-Chloe, mother of 2

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Study findings highlight the need for Child Protection to be more accountable for transparent decision-making and referral pathways to facilitate holistic support for families affected by DFV. Mothers in this study felt under-informed around their own and Child Protection obligations, processes and support options. Clear, effective and transparent communication about Child Protection processes is a system responsibility. This study indicates that legal assistance can provide greater transparency around Child Protection decision-making and support parental engagement.

## Conclusion

Findings from this study align with the policy objectives of the Victorian Government's *Roadmap* and the 2021-2024 priority setting plan. However, we also identify persistent gaps in service responses that requires authentic and comprehensive reorientation of the Child Protection practice. Putting this approach into practice would ensure Child Protection meets its obligation to support vulnerable families rather than solely fulfilling a risk assessment and management function. Partnering with parents/carers to support safe and secure parenting practices must be recognised as an investment in children's recovery and wellbeing. While monitoring child safety and wellbeing remains critical in Child Protection work, it is in the best interests of children to work with parents/mothers to meet their child's care needs. Where it is necessary to remove children from parental care due to unacceptable risk of harm, Child Protection practice should remain focused on proactively supporting parental engagement and restoring safe and secure parent-child relationships. The implementation of the recommendations made here will support the Victorian Child Protection system in shifting towards a proactive, strengths-based, trauma informed approach that promotes the wellbeing and safety of children. Such a shift places early intervention and family functioning at the centre of Child Protection practice.



# Recommendations

## A Framework for action

### Outcome: Strengths-based care for children and their families

1. Develop a shared practice framework that consolidates strength-based approaches within and across Victoria's child and family system.
2. Develop an evaluation and reporting framework to facilitate evidence building and information sharing on good practice indicators for strengths-based practice.

### Outcome: Embedding trauma and DFV informed practice

3. Where families seeking reunification are affected by DFV, Child Protection intervention must prioritise timely access to recovery services for all affected family members.
4. Conduct annual independent case reviews to report on progress in the implementation of trauma and DFV informed child protection practice.
5. Track and report annually on the delivery of MARAM training for the Child Protection workforce by role and classification and compliance with MARAM practice requirements.
6. Track and publicly report annually on the delivery of training for, and compliance with, the SAFER Children Risk Assessment framework for the Child Protection workforce by role and classification.
7. Department of Families, Fairness and Housing should receive additional funding to increase numbers of Specialist family violence workers/senior Child Protection practitioners (family violence) across area offices in Victoria.



## Outcome: Cross-sector service integration to support trauma recovery

- 8. Develop and implement an early intervention pilot program involving Child Protection and Women's Legal Services Victoria to strengthen engagement and communication with mothers experiencing family violence.
- 9. Establish a cross-sectorial working group to facilitate cross-sector collaboration and enable stakeholders to contribute to strategic policy goals and shared practice.
- 10. Provide additional funding to DFV specialists and children/family services to strengthen cross-sector collaborations, ensure timely referrals and support DFV trauma recovery.

## Outcome: Working with parents/carers who are perpetrators

- 11. Develop and deliver mandatory best practice training on identifying and responding to parents/carers who are perpetrators of DFV for Child Protection workers in addition to MARAM training.

## Outcome: Early assistance and meaningful intervention

- 12. Ensure Child Protection practitioners facilitate early assistance for parents/carers to build family functioning as well as timely referrals based on individual needs assessments.
- 13. Establish comprehensive referral pathways between Child Protection and appropriate services to facilitate proactive, integrated support for children and families.
- 14. Provide resourcing to expand early intervention models that are independently evaluated and prove effective in achieving family preservation and reunification.

## Outcome: Greater accountability and systems transparency

- 15. Strengthen internal Child Protection processes to ensure court reports provide accurate and timely information, include family strengths and capabilities and address relevant statutory requirements.

## Outcome: Child-focused reunification timeframes

- 16. Further amend the legislation to allow family reunification orders to be extended beyond 24 months where progress toward reunification has been delayed by exceptional circumstances and reunification remains in the best interests of the child as determined by the Children's Court.