

FINAL REPORT 2026

TRUST, STABILITY AND SAFETY

Reimagining service responses to domestic and family violence through children's eyes

54 reasons

Dr Kate Fitz-Gibbon

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the true and ongoing custodians of the unceded lands on which we meet and conduct our research. We pay respect to Elders of these lands past and present, and acknowledge the important role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and their ongoing leadership in addressing family, domestic and sexual violence, and intergenerational harms. These always were and always will be Aboriginal lands.

We acknowledge victim-survivors of all forms of domestic, family and sexual violence, including those who died by suicide. We acknowledge children as victim-survivors of violence and abuse in their own right.

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First and foremost, thank you to the children who participated in this study and generously shared their experiences, insights, and reflections. This research would not have been possible without your courage, honesty, and vision for change.

I also express my appreciation to the 54 reasons service providers and frontline practitioners who supported the recruitment process by facilitating connections with child victim-survivors. Your assistance was vital in ensuring that the voices of young victim-survivors were heard and centred in this work.

This study was commissioned by 54 reasons and forms part of a broader research partnership focused on strengthening policy and service responses to children and young people experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence. The experiences and insights shared by the 17 child victim-survivors interviewed for this study subsequently informed the national consultation undertaken to support development of the Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 (Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026). Together, these projects provide complementary evidence to inform reform, bringing children's direct accounts into conversation with the perspectives of practitioners, policymakers, researchers, Children's Commissioners and youth advocates across Australia.

Dr Kate Fitz-Gibbon led this project in her capacity as a Principal Consultant with Sequre Consulting. This work is wholly independent of Kate Fitz-Gibbon's current membership on the Victorian Children's Council and role as Chair of the Victorian Collaborative Centre for Mental Health and Wellbeing.

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“THEY SHOULD TAKE LIKE REPORTS SERIOUSLY IF THE KIDS TRYING TO EXPLAIN SOMETHING TO THEM, INSTEAD OF JUST BRUSHING THEM OFF...”



01

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents new evidence on how Australia's crisis and recovery systems can better meet the needs of children and young people experiencing domestic and family violence. The study adds a unique contribution to the evidence base by foregrounding the voices of younger children aged 10 to 14 years old who have experienced different forms of violence and abuse. Very few Australian or international studies have engaged directly with children in this age group about their own experiences of domestic and family violence and help-seeking. Capturing their perspectives provides invaluable insights into how children at this developmental stage understand safety, trust, and recovery, and how systems can respond in ways that are meaningful, age-appropriate and effective.

Drawing on interviews with 17 child victim-survivors aged 10–17 years old across Queensland, Western Australia, and Victoria, this study explores how child victim-survivors experience crisis responses, including housing and specialist support services, and what they identify as required in policy and practice to better support their safety and wellbeing needs. The project findings highlight that for children who have experienced violence and abuse, safety is deeply relational, and trust, stability, and connection are central to their sense of wellbeing. Child victim-survivors interviewed for this study often-times described experiences of disbelief when seeking help, instability in housing and schooling, and the absence of clear information about where to turn for support. Other young victim-survivors interviewed spoke about the positive difference made by trusted adults, consistent care, and opportunities to continue learning and maintain relationships during crisis.

The findings underscore the need for systemic reform: crisis and recovery responses must be re-designed through children's eyes and grounded in a child rights-based approach. Doing so requires systemic reform to ensure that housing, education, and support services work together to deliver stability, safety, and belonging for children impacted by domestic and family violence.

These findings also support broader calls for a renewed national focus on children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, including as part of the development of the Second Action Plan (2027–2032) under the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032. This includes embedding child-specific actions, strengthening education and housing supports, and establishing national indicators for measuring progress towards improving crisis system and longer-term recovery responses for child victim-survivors of domestic and family violence.

The study identifies several priorities for strengthening crisis responses for children and young people experiencing domestic and family violence. These include improving the availability of child-specific specialist supports, strengthening workforce capability to respond to children's disclosures, increasing access to safe and stable housing, embedding educational supports within crisis accommodation, and ensuring that children's own experiences and priorities inform service design and evaluation. These priorities provide an evidence-informed foundation for improving crisis responses and advancing national commitments to recognising children as victim-survivors in their own right.

FOREWORD

Most of the systems built to protect and support children were designed without them.

More often than not, adults decide where a child will live, which school they attend, who supports them and what that support looks like. These decisions are almost always made with care and good intent, but too often, without asking the children they are made for. When children's voices are missing, even well-designed services can miss what matters most.

At 54 reasons, we know that children and young people who experience violence are victim-survivors in their own right, with their own needs, strengths and rights. They deserve to be believed, to be taken seriously, and to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

That's why we commissioned this research, and why we asked Dr Kate Fitz-Gibbon to speak directly with children and young people who have been part of our services.

What they told us is striking in its practicality. They didn't ask for anything extraordinary. They asked to be believed the first time they spoke up, to have somewhere stable to live, to stay at their school and close to their friends and family, and to have adults around them who listen and then act.

To the 17 children and young people who shared their experiences: thank you. You trusted us with some of the hardest parts of your lives so that things could be better for other children. We will honour that generosity with relentless effort to make change for kids now and for years to come.

My thanks also to Kate Fitz-Gibbon, and to the 54 reasons practitioners whose relationships with these young people made these conversations possible.

But listening alone is not enough. When children tell us what they need, we have a duty to respond, both in how we deliver our own services and in what we ask of governments on their behalf. That's why, following this research, we partnered with Kate Fitz-Gibbon and Matt Tyler to consult with more than 200 stakeholders – including young people – across Australia to find a pathway to action.

The result, *From Recognition to Action*, sets out 20 actions governments can take to make children and young people safer from family violence.

They include:

- specialist domestic, family and sexual violence response services for children and young people in every state and territory;
- equipping the workforces who engage with children to respond safely to disclosures and provide better ongoing support; and
- the accountability architecture needed to make commitments stick, including a Federal Minister for Children and national participation standards that give children a seat at the tables where decisions about their lives are made.

The two reports are designed to be read together. This report holds the listening: the foundational lessons from children and young people about what safety, trust and stability mean in their lives. *From Recognition to Action* shows how to turn those lessons into change. You can find more in *From Recognition to Action* on page 44.

Australia has recognised children as victim-survivors in their own right. That recognition now needs to show up in children's everyday lives: in the response they get when they speak up, in the homes they live in and in the schools they attend. We will keep listening to children, and we will keep holding ourselves and governments to account for responding.

Vicki Mau
Executive Director, 54 reasons



ABOUT 54 REASONS

With their voices and views at the centre of our work, 54 reasons exists to make rights real for children and young people across Australia. We're proudly part of the Save the Children Australia group, and our name represents our shared foundations: the 54 articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We champion all of these rights in our work, with a clear focus on three strategic priorities:

1. supporting children & young people's social & emotional development in regions affected by shared adversity or disaster;
2. ensuring children experiencing domestic and family violence are visible and supported as clients in their own right; and,
3. advocating and demonstrating the value of a rights-respecting youth justice system.

Each year, we support more than 20,000 children and families through 35+ outcome-driven services across Australia. And because the system doesn't always create the conditions for children and young people to thrive, we're working to lift a national conversation on child rights to drive change.

Together with children, young people and our partners, we're making rights real for children and young people in Australia through services that empower, systems that listen and communities that act.

RESEARCH THEMES

1
CHILDREN'S VOICES MATTER

Listening directly to child victim-survivors provides critical insights into what safety, trust, and recovery mean in their lives, insights that cannot be captured through a reliance on adult accounts alone.

2
YOUNGER CHILD VICTIM-SURVIVORS ARE RARELY HEARD

This study is one of the few in Australia to engage directly with children aged 10–14 years old about their experiences of domestic and family violence and help-seeking.

3
SAFETY IS RELATIONAL AS WELL AS PHYSICAL

Children described safety not only as protection from harm but as critical to recovery and healing – they referred to the importance of the presence of trusted and caring adults, predictable routines, and stable environments.

4
TRUST IS FUNDAMENTAL

Child victim-survivors often reported that their first disclosures of victimisation were met with disbelief or inaction. Building and sustaining trust through consistent, transparent, and child-centred practice is essential, particularly at the point of crisis.

5
STABILITY UNDERPINS HEALING AND RECOVERY

Frequent moves between temporary housing options often disrupted children's education and sense of belonging. Policy and service responses should prioritise continuity in housing, care, and schooling to support the recovery and healing needs of child victim-survivors.

6
EDUCATION IS PROTECTIVE

Maintaining learning continuity provides children who have experienced domestic and family violence with structure, stability and connection. Embedding education support roles within or across refuges could strengthen recovery efforts and support school re-engagement.

7
CONNECTION FOSTERS HEALING AND RECOVERY

Safe family relationships and peer connections play a vital role in helping children rebuild identity, confidence, and stability after experiences of domestic and family violence victimisation.

8
SYSTEM REFORM IS NEEDED

Cross-sector collaboration between social services, housing, education, justice, and child protection systems is necessary to deliver coherent, accessible and age-appropriate pathways to safety and recovery for children who experience domestic and family violence.

9
A CHILD RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH PROVIDES AN IMPORTANT FOUNDATION

Embedding a child rights-based approach, including the principles of participation, best interests, and accountability, will ensure that children are recognised as central to the nation's stated commitment to end gender-based violence in one generation.



THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE INTERVIEWED FOR THIS STUDY DID NOT DESCRIBE EXTRAORDINARY EXPECTATIONS OF THE SYSTEMS INTENDED TO SUPPORT THEM.

They wanted to feel safe, to be believed when they disclosed violence, to have stable places to live, to remain connected to their schools, friends and families, and to know that the adults around them would listen and act.

These are fundamental needs that should be met for every child experiencing domestic and family violence. Yet the findings of this study demonstrate that existing crisis responses do not consistently deliver these foundations of safety and wellbeing. As the Federal Government develops the Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032, the challenge is to ensure that commitments to recognising children as victim-survivors in their own right are reflected in the services, supports and opportunities available to them. Achieving this requires moving beyond policy recognition towards crisis responses that are designed around children's own understandings of safety, stability and recovery.



02

INTRODUCTION

A safe home should not be a dream, nor an aspiration. It should be a reality for all Australian children. Yet for the more than two in five children in Australia who experience domestic and family violence, the idea of safety at home is elusive at best and altogether fictional for many. According to the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS, Mathews et al. 2023), in Australia:

Nearly
1 in 3
children experience physical abuse

28%
experience sexual abuse

Over
30%
experience emotional abuse

Just under
1 in 10
children experience neglect

Findings from the ACMS also reveal significant differences in the prevalence and nature of maltreatment experienced by different groups of children and young people. Girls are disproportionately likely to experience sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect, and children and young people who identify as gender diverse report particularly high rates of victimisation (Mathews et al., 2023). For example, the ACMS found that 52 per cent of gender-diverse respondents had experienced childhood sexual abuse (Mathews et al., 2023).

Disproportionate experiences of childhood victimisation, and in children's interactions with statutory protection systems, are also evident among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children with disability. National child protection data reveal that First Nations children are approximately six times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be the subject of substantiated maltreatment, a disparity that must be understood in the context of colonisation, systemic racism, intergenerational disadvantage and unequal interactions with statutory systems (AIHW, 2026). Australian research has also identified the disproportionate experiences of violence and abuse among children with a disability, alongside significant barriers to disclosure, help-seeking and accessing services that are responsive to the communication, developmental and support needs of young victim-survivors with a disability (Robinson et al., 2022). These findings highlight the importance of recognising how intersecting forms of disadvantage, discrimination and systemic barriers can heighten children's vulnerability to violence and abuse, while also creating additional barriers to accessing safe, culturally appropriate and effective supports.

FIRST NATIONS CHILDREN ARE APPROXIMATELY SIX TIMES MORE LIKELY THAN NON-INDIGENOUS CHILDREN TO BE THE SUBJECT OF SUBSTANTIATED MALTREATMENT.

The impacts of experiencing violence and abuse during childhood can be significant, complex and enduring, with consequences for children's immediate safety and wellbeing, their development, and their longer-term health and life outcomes. Findings from the ACMS demonstrate a strong association between experiences of childhood maltreatment and subsequent mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. Almost half of Australians who reported experiencing childhood maltreatment met the diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder, compared to approximately one in five Australians who had not experienced child maltreatment (Scott et al., 2023). The ACMS also identified increased risks of self-harm, suicide attempts and harmful substance use among those who had experienced childhood maltreatment (Lawrence et al., 2023, see also Meyer et al., 2023). Experiences of violence and abuse can also disrupt children's capacity to engage in education, affecting school attendance, learning, concentration and educational attainment, while undermining their ability to maintain relationships with family and friends and experience the stability and security that are fundamental to healthy development (on education, see further Stewart, Fitz-Gibbon & Roberts, 2025). For children and young people experiencing domestic and family violence, these impacts can be compounded by the disruption associated with seeking safety, including displacement from the family home, periods of housing instability and interruptions to schooling. Recognising the breadth and interconnected nature of these impacts is critical to ensuring that crisis responses extend beyond addressing immediate safety risks to also supporting children's continued engagement in education, their social connections, and their longer-term recovery and healing.



CHILDREN EXPERIENCE DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE IN WAYS THAT ARE DISTINCT FROM ADULTS.

THE INCREASING RECOGNITION OF CHILD VICTIM-SURVIVORS IN NATIONAL POLICY

There is increasing acknowledgement at the Federal, state and territory levels of the need to better respond to children and young people as victim-survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence in their own right. The National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 (Department of Social Services, 2022) embeds this recognition, and there have been calls at national and state levels to ensure that early intervention and crisis system responses evolve to deliver age-appropriate, trauma-informed and child-centred practices for young victim-survivors (see, among others, Fitz-Gibbon, 2025a; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2023; Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026; Meyer & Fitz-Gibbon, 2022; Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016; South Australian Government, 2025).

The recognition of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right represents an important shift in Australian policy. Historically, domestic and family violence responses have been predominantly adult-centred, with children often understood as secondary victims of violence perpetrated against a parent or caregiver, rather than individuals experiencing distinct forms of harm and requiring dedicated responses to their own safety and wellbeing needs (see, among others, Fogden, Humphreys & Tsantefski, 2023). This adult-centred approach has contributed to service systems in which children's distinct experiences, perspectives and support needs have frequently been overlooked or subsumed within responses designed primarily for adults (Fitz-Gibbon, 2025a; FVREE, 2026; Robinson et al., 2022). Increasingly, research and policy reform have challenged this approach, recognising that children experience domestic and family violence in ways that are distinct from adults, and that effective responses must recognise their individual safety and wellbeing needs, developmental circumstances, relationships, rights and experiences of seeking help (most recently, see recommended actions identified by Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026).

At the national level, the National Plan establishes a commitment to recognising children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right across the four pillars of prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery and healing (DSS, 2022). The National Plan recognises the need to elevate children's voices in policy and service design, strengthen access to age-appropriate supports, and ensure that responses address both the immediate and longer-term impacts of violence. The First Action Plan 2023–2027 builds on these commitments, including through Action 8, which focuses specifically on children and young people, and Action 10, which seeks to improve access to short, medium and long-term housing for women and children experiencing violence (DSS, 2023). These commitments provide an important policy foundation for improving the ways in which crisis and recovery systems recognise and respond to the distinct needs of child victim-survivors.

Despite this growing recognition, significant challenges remain in translating policy commitments into meaningful and consistent service responses for children and young people (Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026; Gillfeather-Spetere & Watson, 2024). Recent Australian research with young victim-survivors has highlighted ongoing gaps in children's access to specialist services, experiences of being disbelieved or dismissed when disclosing violence, and the absence of accessible, age-appropriate pathways to safety and support (Dimopoulos et al., 2024; Fitz-Gibbon, 2025a; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2023; RMIT Centre for Innovative Justice, 2025). Recognising children as victim-survivors in their own right must therefore extend beyond policy commitments to ensure that their individual needs, experiences and perspectives inform the design, delivery and evaluation of services, and that child-specific responses are supported with sustained investment commensurate with the scale and complexity of the challenge.

The current development of the Second Action Plan (2027–2032) under the National Plan presents an important opportunity to strengthen Australia's commitment to children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right. In particular, there is an opportunity to move beyond symbolic recognition towards the implementation of child-centred responses that provide accessible pathways to safety, minimise disruption to education and social connections, and support longer-term recovery and healing. Achieving this requires a stronger evidence base on how children and young people experience existing crisis responses, what they identify as helpful or harmful, and what changes are needed to ensure that services respond meaningfully to their distinct needs and circumstances.

Reflecting the increasing recognition in policy and practice, 54 reasons commissioned this study to better understand the experiences of children and young people who have experienced domestic and family violence, and have accessed their crisis response services. Drawing on insights gained through interviews with 17 young victim-survivors aged 10–17 years old, this study seeks to identify opportunities to improve crisis responses, including access to safe housing, continuity of education, and support for children's safety, stability and wellbeing. Importantly, by engaging directly with younger child victim-survivors, whose perspectives have often been absent from the existing evidence base, this research provides new insights into how crisis services can better recognise and respond to children's distinct experiences and needs. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to the growing evidence base needed to translate national policy commitments into meaningful improvements in the everyday experiences of children and young people seeking safety from violence.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING TO CHILDREN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE

Listening to children's lived experiences of domestic and family violence is fundamental to understanding how systems can better meet their safety, stability, and recovery needs. Until recently, children's direct voices have been largely absent from research, policy, and service design. Much of what is known about children's experiences has been filtered through the perspectives of adults – for example, parents, practitioners, or service providers – rather than grounded in children's own accounts of what safety, fear, and support mean to them. Writing just under a decade ago now, Domestic Violence NSW Service Management (2017) identified that the majority of studies on children's needs have been written from an adult perspective, resulting in services that often fail to reflect children's lived realities.

There is now growing recognition of the value of engaging directly with children and young people who have experienced domestic and family violence to inform policy and practice reform. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS, 2020) notes that children's participation in research is vital to shaping policies and practices that impact their lives. When children are meaningfully involved in describing their experiences, they illuminate dimensions of violence, response and recovery that adult accounts do not centre. By listening to children in their own words, researchers and practitioners can better understand the barriers they face in seeking help, the gaps in current service systems, and the kinds of crisis and longer-term responses that will meaningfully support safety and recovery.

Importantly, engaging directly with children and young people who have experienced violence and abuse is also a matter of children's rights. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) establishes children's right to express their views freely in matters affecting them, and to have those views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity (United Nations, 1989). As Lundy (2007) argues, meaningful participation requires more than providing children with opportunities to express their views, it also requires ensuring that those views are listened to and have the opportunity to influence decisions that affect their lives. This principle has important implications for how children are engaged in research, policy development and service design. Reflecting this, the national consultation undertaken to inform the Second Action Plan recommended the development of national guidelines for the safe and meaningful participation of children and young people who have experienced violence and abuse in policy, advocacy and service design. The proposed guidelines would establish minimum standards for ethical and developmentally appropriate participation, alongside practical supports to ensure that children's involvement is meaningful and that their perspectives inform decisions affecting their lives (Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026).

Recognising children as victim-survivors in their own right requires more than acknowledging their experiences of harm. It also requires recognising their agency, perspectives and expertise in understanding their own lives. Within this, meaningful participation must extend beyond providing children with opportunities to share their experiences, to ensuring that their views inform decisions about the services, policies and systems intended to support fulfilment of their needs, including their safety, wellbeing and recovery.

Engaging directly with children and young people is particularly important in the context of domestic and family violence, where children's understandings of safety, trust and recovery may differ significantly from those of the adults in and around their lives. There may be dimensions of safety and recovery which are overlooked when research and service design rely predominantly on adult accounts of children's experiences, needs and risks. Importantly, there is also a need to recognise that children are not a homogenous group. Their experiences of violence, understandings of safety, opportunities to seek help and healing and recovery needs are shaped by their age, developmental stage, relationships, cultural and social circumstances, and previous interactions with services. Ensuring that the perspectives of younger children are included in research is particularly important, given their historical underrepresentation in studies of domestic and family violence and the tendency for research where it does engage younger participants to present the experiences of adolescents and young adults.

Taken together, these considerations reinforce the importance of research approaches that recognise children as experts in their own experiences and create safe, developmentally appropriate opportunities for them to contribute to building the evidence base. Listening directly to child victim-survivors provides insights that cannot be fully captured through adult accounts alone, while also creating opportunities to challenge existing adult-centred assumptions about what children need from crisis and recovery systems. Importantly, the value of children's participation must be measured not only by whether their voices are heard, but by whether those voices contribute to meaningful changes in the policies and services that shape their lives.



RECOGNISING CHILDREN AS VICTIM-SURVIVORS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT MUST EXTEND BEYOND POLICY COMMITMENTS.

STUDY DESIGN

This report presents findings from a qualitative study with young victim-survivors of family violence. Specifically, in-depth interviews were conducted with 17 child victim-survivors of domestic and family violence aged between 10 and 17 years old. The aim of this study was to better understand the experiences of children and young people in accessing crisis services, including safe housing, after experiencing domestic and family violence victimisation. The study aimed to explore whether crisis responses, including housing services, are meeting the needs of child victim-survivors, and specifically, whether young people feel safe, heard and supported. As part of this study, we sought to identify what improvements can be made to ensure safe and effective crisis service responses, including housing options, for children as victim-survivors of domestic and family violence in their own right.

In particular, by interviewing children aged 10 years and over, this study contributes new insights into the perspectives of pre-adolescent child victim-survivors, a group that has been largely missing from the existing evidence base. Few studies have engaged directly with children in this younger age group about their lived and living experiences of violence and help-seeking. Capturing their voices and experiences of system navigation provides invaluable insights into how children at this developmental stage perceive safety, trust, and recovery, and how systems can better respond in age-appropriate ways.

This study was underpinned from the outset by a child rights-based approach, recognising children and young people as rights holders and experts in their own lives. Consistent with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the research was founded on the principle that children have the right to express their views freely on matters affecting them. Rather than positioning children as passive recipients of services or relying solely on adult interpretations of their experiences, this study sought to create meaningful opportunities for child victim-survivors to directly inform the evidence base. In doing so, the research recognises that children possess unique knowledge and expertise about what safety, support, recovery and healing mean in their own lives, and that listening to their voices is essential to designing policies and services that effectively respond to their needs.



INTERVIEWS WITH VICTIM-SURVIVORS

The children interviewed for this study were living in Queensland, Western Australia and Victoria, and were recruited via 54 reasons practitioners.[1] Of the children interviewed, seven identified as male and 10 identified as female. Interviews with child victim-survivors were conducted via phone, Zoom and in person – depending on the preference of the child interviewed.

Recruitment was undertaken by 54 reasons practitioners who had existing therapeutic relationships with the children and young people. Practitioners identified potential participants using predefined eligibility criteria: participants were required to be between 10 and 18 years of age, have lived experience of domestic and family violence, and be currently or recently engaged with a 54 reasons service. Practitioners also exercised their professional judgement to determine whether a young person was emotionally ready to participate, taking into account their wellbeing, stability and ongoing engagement with support services. This approach ensured that participation prioritised children's safety while also reducing the risk of re-traumatisation.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Practitioners provided eligible children and young people with a Participant Information and Consent Form and explained the study using developmentally appropriate language. Young people aged 16 to 18 years provided their own informed consent to participate. For children aged 10 to 15 years, dual consent was obtained from both the child and their parent or guardian, with the child's own assent and willingness to participate remaining central throughout the process.

All interviews were conducted by Dr Kate Fitz-Gibbon using a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore children's experiences of seeking help, accessing crisis accommodation, feeling heard within service systems, and identifying opportunities to improve housing and broader crisis responses for child victim-survivors. The interview schedule was intentionally flexible, allowing participants to determine which questions were most relevant to their experiences and ensuring that discussions remained responsive to each child's circumstances.

The study adopted a trauma-informed and child-centred approach throughout. Interviews were conducted at a time and in a format chosen by participants, and young people were offered the opportunity to have a trusted support person present. Participants could also request a copy of the interview questions before the interview to reduce uncertainty and enhance their sense of control. Participants could choose whether or not their interview was audio recorded. Where consent to audio recording was not provided, detailed written notes were taken instead.

INTERVIEWS WITH PRACTITIONERS

To complement the interviews with child victim-survivors, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with experienced 54 reasons practitioners. These interviews provided professional perspectives on children's experiences of crisis responses, the challenges encountered in supporting children experiencing domestic and family violence, and opportunities to strengthen policy and practice. Practitioner interviews also provided important contextual information to support interpretation of the findings from the child interviews. All practitioner interviews were conducted via Zoom.

Practitioners were recruited through 54 reasons based on their experience working directly with children and young people experiencing domestic and family violence and their familiarity with crisis accommodation and housing pathways. Interviews explored practitioners' observations of children's experiences navigating crisis systems, perceived barriers to accessing appropriate housing and supports, examples of effective practice, and recommendations for service improvement. The practitioner interviews provided additional context for understanding the broader service system within which children sought support.

[1] The study received approval from the Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID: 2025-03-334).

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews with child victim-survivors were audio recorded where participants provided consent. Where participants chose not to be audio recorded, detailed written notes were taken by the interviewer throughout the interview. Audio recordings were transcribed in full, after which the transcripts were reviewed for accuracy and de-identified prior to analysis.

Qualitative data were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach. Interview transcripts and written interview notes were imported into NVivo qualitative analysis software, where they were systematically coded to identify recurring themes across participants' experiences as well as areas of divergence in children's accounts of help-seeking, housing, safety, trust and recovery. The analysis was iterative, involving repeated reading of transcripts, and the development and refinement of coding categories.

The analysis was guided by the study's child-centred approach. Children's own accounts were prioritised throughout the analytical process, recognising them as experts in their own lives and experiences. Wherever possible, throughout this report the findings are illustrated through direct quotes from child victim-survivors to ensure their voices remain central to this report. Quotes have been de-identified to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality.

The practitioner interviews were analysed alongside the interviews with child victim-survivors using the same thematic approach. Practitioner perspectives were not treated as a substitute for children's experiences but rather as contextual evidence to assist interpretation of the broader service system within which children sought support. Throughout the report, practitioner observations are used to complement, explain or reinforce themes identified by child participants, while ensuring that the lived experiences and recommendations of the child victim-survivors interviewed remain the primary focus of the analysis.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

As a qualitative study involving 17 child victim-survivors and three practitioners, the study findings are not intended to be representative of the experiences of all children and young people experiencing domestic and family violence in Australia. Participants were recruited through their engagement with 54 reasons services, meaning the study does not capture the experiences of children who have not accessed formal supports or who have encountered barriers to engaging with services. The study also reflects the experiences of children across three Australian jurisdictions, and these experiences may differ according to local service availability, policy settings and individual circumstances. Nevertheless, the direct accounts of young victim-survivors, particularly those aged 10–14 years old, provide important insights into a group whose perspectives remain underrepresented in Australian research.

17
child victim-survivors interviewed

10-17
years of age

7/10
identified as male / female

3
states: QLD, WA and VIC



03

STUDY FINDINGS

How can we improve crisis supports for child victim-survivors of domestic and family violence?

The study findings provide unique insights into the help-seeking experiences and crisis service needs of very young victim-survivors. The study builds new understandings of what 'safe housing' means from a child victim's perspective, and how early interventions, crisis responses, and approaches to recovery and healing can be improved to better reflect the needs and experiences of children who experience domestic and family violence.

When asked what a safe home meant to them, child victim-survivors interviewed provided a range of different responses. Some young people interviewed were unable to describe what a 'safe home' meant to them, reflecting both the complexity of their experiences and, for some, the absence of a clear reference point for safety. Others described safety in tangible, concrete ways that reflected their everyday realities and the physical and emotional security they longed for. One 11-year-old child victim-survivor described a safe home as a home:

> ***"With a mum that keeps you safe and playing in the back yard with a high fence so no one can get in."***

Similarly, when asked the same question, another child victim described:

> ***"High fences and a mum that looks after her children, and no beating each other up."***

These accounts illustrate how child victims conceptualise safety through both physical protection and nurturing relationships. For some, the notion of safety was closely tied to the presence of caring adults, and the absence of violence or fear within the home. Others identified emotional security and support as central to feeling safe:

> ***"A place where it's a safe environment and you get support."***

> ***"Everyone is so nice … I feel like they do like everything they need to."***

These reflections suggest that temporary housing environments can provide meaningful safety for children when they are characterised by warmth, predictability, and responsive support from adults.

Where young people described not feeling safe in temporary housing, that experience was often characterised by the absence of trusted relationships or familiar people in their lives. For example, when asked whether they felt safe in refuge, one child victim-survivor remarked:

> ***"Not really, because there are strangers … I ran away sometimes to go to my Aunty's to see her."***

Such insights reinforce that safety for children is relational as much as it is physical. The presence of trusted adults, opportunities for connection, and consistency in care are essential to fostering both immediate and enduring feelings of safety. Crisis support systems should be designed with a clear recognition that a safe home for a child is one where physical protection, emotional care, and trusted relationships coexist.



THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST

“THEY DIDN’T BELIEVE ME BECAUSE I WAS YOUNG.”

Closely related to this, and echoing recent research findings (see, among others, Fitz-Gibbon, 2025a; Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan and Stewart, 2023), throughout the interviews young people repeatedly spoke to the importance of trust – and in particular, demonstrations of trust following an initial disclosure of victimisation. For many of the young victim-survivors interviewed, the first time they disclosed their victimisation they were met with disbelief and inaction on the part of an adult they thought they could trust to keep them safe. Throughout the interviews, young people’s accounts of disclosing harm revealed that the erosion of trust was not confined to individual adults but also reflected broader shortcomings in the service system and at times, a systemic inability to respond meaningfully to children’s shared accounts of violence and abuse.

A number of the child victims interviewed described experiences where their disclosures were dismissed and where they were returned to an unsafe environment following their disclosure of harm. These experiences illustrated the ways in which system responses can inadvertently perpetuate harm. As captured in the following reflections from child victim-survivors:

> ***"They should take like reports seriously if the kids trying to explain something to them, instead of just brushing them off and giving them right back to the parent."***

> ***"I think sometimes police don't take kids seriously, especially when they're very distressed … I feel like police should trust kids more."***

Disclosures followed by inaction had significant impacts upon the early help-seeking of these child victim-survivors, and in several cases, meant there was a delay in them receiving services to address their safety and wellbeing needs. When asked what they wish had occurred differently looking back, one child victim-survivor commented, "Be more responsive when kids ask for help." The loss of trust from a key adult in their life was described by several children interviewed as profoundly isolating. Young people spoke about feeling "invisible" or "not worth helping," which compounded the trauma of the violence itself and diminished their confidence and willingness to seek help again in the future.

Importantly, for children and young people, trust is not only relational but developmental. Throughout the interviews, children described a trusting relationship as underpinning their sense of safety and capacity to re-engage with adults and systems following their experiences of trauma. When this trust is broken, it can reinforce beliefs that adults are unsafe or uninterested in protecting them. One young person described the trauma of not being able to trust adults in their life. When asked what breaks trust, she commented, "they don't understand and they're unworthy." Another description capturing the importance of trust came from a child victim who, when asked what was the most important thing for an adult to do when they hear a disclosure of violence, said "That they won't tell anyone else and won't bully me." This reflection also highlights the importance of ensuring that children understand the limits of confidentiality when disclosing violence or abuse. While professionals may have statutory obligations to report concerns about children's safety, developmentally appropriate explanations of these obligations, including what information may be shared, with whom and why, are essential to maintaining trust. Wherever possible, children should be supported to understand and participate in decisions about the next steps following disclosure, rather than experiencing these processes as something being done to them without their knowledge or involvement.

The practitioners interviewed also stressed the importance of trust – in particular, the importance of building a trusting relationship between the young victim-survivors and the practitioner. It was acknowledged that this takes time, and that building trust must also be accompanied by a commitment to maintain the demonstration of that trust over time. Building on this, practitioners interviewed described the importance of repairing trust with young people, which requires consistent follow-through on promises, transparency about processes, and involving children in decisions about their own safety. For many, reliability in small actions, for example returning a phone call or remembering details of their story, mattered as much as major interventions.

These insights highlight that building and sustaining trust must be central to all service and policy responses for children affected by violence and abuse. This includes strengthening workforce capability to respond to children's disclosures with belief, sensitivity and accountability from the very first disclosure. Workforce development should equip professionals across universal services, including education and health as well as child protection and specialist services with the knowledge and skills to communicate with children in developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed ways, explain decisions and processes clearly, and meaningfully involve children in decisions affecting their safety and wellbeing (on this, see also recommended actions under the response pillar in Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026). Importantly, training should focus on the practical behaviours that build trust over time, including following through on commitments, responding consistently to disclosures, maintaining confidentiality wherever possible (noting mandatory reporting laws vary somewhat in each Australian state and territory), and recognising the profound consequences when children's disclosures are minimised, dismissed or ignored. Building trust should not be viewed as an interpersonal skill alone, but as a core capability that underpins effective and child-centred responses to domestic and family violence. Ultimately, throughout the interviews children's accounts of disclosing harm demonstrate that trust is built not simply through listening to disclosures, but through responding to them. For child victim-survivors, the most powerful demonstration that an adult believed them was not what they said, it was what they did.



"BE MORE RESPONSIVE WHEN KIDS ASK FOR HELP."



THE IMPORTANCE OF STABILITY

“MY MUM DOESN’T REALLY TELL ME ... WHEN I MOVE. MY CARERS TELL ME. BUT SOMETIMES I DON’T WANT TO MOVE, THEN THEY JUST MOVE ME.”

One of the common needs stressed by child victim-survivors interviewed was the value of stability, alongside the ongoing impact of the lack of stability often experienced by children and young people who experience violence and abuse. Perhaps unsurprisingly given their prior experiences of domestic and family violence, child victim-survivors often described periods of instability in their lives and the negative impacts of those experiences upon their sense of safety and wellbeing. Some children described becoming “used to” instability, suggesting a normalisation of uncertainty that undermined their ability to plan for the future or feel confident that safety could last.

For several of the young people interviewed, stability was understood not only in terms of a safe and consistent place to live, but also the reliability of the adults around them and the predictability of daily routines. Several young people associated stability with having a consistent carer or caseworker who listened, remembered their story, and followed through on commitments. In contrast, constant changes in housing, schooling, or case management were described as exhausting and disorienting for the child victim-survivor.

Within this, a number of child victims reflected on the negative impacts of experiencing unstable housing after escaping domestic and family violence. One child victim, who had lived in numerous safe accommodation options for a couple of weeks at a time, remarked:

> ***"You better get used to moving a bunch … get prepared for it – if it's temporary housing."***

Practitioners acknowledged that while short-term crisis accommodation is often unavoidable, the lack of long-term, child-appropriate housing options severely limits children's recovery and sense of stability. They emphasised that each move, no matter how well-intentioned, can re-trigger trauma by reminding children of earlier experiences of displacement and loss of control.

These accounts reinforce the importance of prioritising stability as a key principle in crisis and recovery responses for children and young people. Policy and practice responses should prioritise minimising unnecessary disruption across all aspects of children's lives, including housing, education, health care, therapeutic supports and relationships with trusted adults. Wherever possible, children should be supported to remain connected to their school, peers, community and other protective relationships, recognising that these connections provide continuity and a sense of normality during periods of significant upheaval. Achieving this requires greater investment in longer-term, child-appropriate housing pathways that reduce repeated moves through temporary accommodation, alongside service models that promote continuity of support. This includes reducing changes in caseworkers wherever possible, strengthening collaboration between services to minimise repeated assessments and retelling of traumatic experiences. Stability should be recognised as a key indicator of children's safety and wellbeing, and embedded within policy frameworks, service standards and performance measures across domestic and family violence responses.



THE RANGE OF SUPPORTS NEEDED TO ENHANCE SAFETY AND WELLBEING

“MY MENTAL HEALTH JUST GOT COMPLETELY LIKE WORSE; I SHUT OFF FROM EVERYTHING AND EVERYONE. I STOPPED GOING TO SCHOOL.”

Young victim-survivors often have a broad range of support needs requiring coordinated responses across services and settings. Throughout the interviews, children described not only their experiences of domestic, family and sexual violence victimisation, but also their experiences of homelessness, school disengagement, youth justice involvement, and alcohol and drug misuse. These often co-occurring experiences highlight the need for integrated services that are set up to respond to children in their own right, not as appendages of a protective parent.

The interviews highlight why enhancing safety and wellbeing for child victim-survivors requires more than crisis intervention. It necessitates access to safe housing, education, therapeutic and justice supports, alongside consistent emotional and relational care. For many children, the impacts of violence were compounded by instability, disrupted schooling, and mental health challenges, underscoring that recovery is inseparable from broader systems of stability and inclusion. Practitioners echoed these findings, emphasising that effectively supporting children's recovery and healing requires sustained, multi-sector coordination and proactive outreach, including child-specific referral pathways, accessible information hubs, and service systems capable of responding to complex and overlapping needs over time.

The need for coordinated, child-specific responses was also identified as a priority in a recent national consultation project, commissioned by 54 reasons to inform the Second Action Plan (Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026). Throughout that consultation, stakeholders called for the establishment and sustainable funding of specialist services for children and young people experiencing violence and abuse in every Australian state and territory jurisdiction, providing developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed care, coordinated referral pathways and multidisciplinary support. Such services would represent an important step towards addressing the fragmentation of supports and services experienced by several of the young victim-survivors interviewed for this study.

A consistent theme across the interviews was the lack of clear, youth-friendly information about where to seek help (on this, see also Fitz-Gibbon, 2025b; Safe Steps, 2025). Many children described being unsure what services existed for children and young people experiencing violence and abuse or how to access them. As one participant explained, "I feel like kids won't know where to get stuff that's really helpful." Notably, there is no 'go to' website or information hub that children identify for this purpose, and, as such, responses to the question of how they sought information about where to seek help were extremely varied. Children described asking for information from trusted family members and friends, particularly where they knew that their friend had also experienced violence, searching for information online and via social media, and asking for information from school. The lack of accessible, age-appropriate information reinforces the invisibility of children across current service systems. Without clear entry points – either physically or via digital spaces – many children who are experiencing violence and abuse reflected being left to rely on anecdotal advice from peers or online searches to make sense of what they were experiencing.

Importantly, barriers to accessing support extend beyond the availability of child-friendly information. The national consultation undertaken to inform the Second Action Plan identified parental consent requirements and mandatory reporting practices as additional barriers to children's independent help-seeking, particularly where children are unable or unwilling to involve a parent or caregiver in accessing support. Stakeholders highlighted the need to review these legislative and procedural barriers to ensure that children and young people can seek help safely and access appropriate services without unnecessary delays or navigating perceived risks associated with disclosure (Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026).



"I GUESS I KNOW THAT THERE'S A LOT MORE PLACES THAT CAN HELP YOU WITH DIFFERENT THINGS NOW, BUT I JUST DIDN'T KNOW WHERE TO GET THE HELP AND SUPPORT THEN."

These findings demonstrate that children need information about support services to be available in the places they already access and trust. Some young people identified social media as one way they may have recognised their experiences and sought support earlier. As one child victim-survivor explained:

> ***"See if it was like on social media platforms and stuff, I would have probably found it a lot earlier. Yeah, because I can scroll and scroll and scroll every day, and a lot, lots of like ads come up on my phone, and I'll have a look."***

Rather than viewing digital platforms simply as sites of risk, these findings suggest they can also provide important opportunities to promote awareness, facilitate early help-seeking and connect children with trusted sources of support. More broadly, these reflections from child victims reinforce the need for governments and service providers to provide information to children in the environments they already engage with, whether online or in person. This includes investing in child-friendly information and awareness campaigns across digital platforms, alongside strengthening help-seeking pathways through schools, community organisations, sporting clubs, health services and dedicated youth-focused online information hubs. As Australia's digital environment continues to evolve since the implementation of the social media delay and the Government's commitment to implement a digital duty of care, it will be essential that any reduction in children's access to social media is accompanied by an investment in alternative, accessible and developmentally appropriate pathways through which children can recognise violence, understand their rights and connect with support.

There were a small number of children interviewed who were already connected into the service system via a school or community-based counsellor while experiencing domestic and family violence, and they often spoke about the value of seeking information from a school-based counsellor, and reflected that this had assisted in supporting their safety needs. Access to specialist counselling and wellbeing supports varies considerably across schools, with many schools lacking counsellors with expertise in domestic and family violence and child victimisation. Strengthening the availability of school-based specialist counselling and wellbeing services, alongside workforce capability across the broader education sector, represents a critical opportunity to improve children's access to trusted adults outside the family home, facilitate earlier identification of violence and abuse, and ensure children receive timely support before their needs and risks escalate.

However, it is important to note that for several children interviewed the first barrier to accessing information to support help-seeking and safety was their own inability to recognise their experience as constituting violence or abuse. One young person shared:

> ***"I was young, I didn't fully know what was happening. I didn't comprehend those things. I thought it was just a one-time thing, I guess, until it started happening continuously. Yeah. So, I thought, okay, it's got to be a one-time thing. This will happen. It won't happen again, but then it happened again and again and again."***

This account illustrates that recognising violence is not intuitive for children. Their understanding is shaped by their age, developmental stage, previous experiences and the information available to them. For children who have grown up with violence, harmful behaviours may become normalised, making it difficult to identify abuse or recognise that support is available. These findings reinforce the importance of ensuring children receive developmentally appropriate education about safety, respectful relationships, children's rights and help-seeking from an early age, so they are better equipped to identify unsafe situations and seek support.



OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE SCHOOL-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Schools represent one of Australia's most significant opportunities to improve outcomes for children and young people experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence. For many child victim-survivors, school is the one universal setting they attend consistently outside the home, making it uniquely positioned to support prevention, early identification, disclosure, referral, recovery and long-term healing. For children whose lives are characterised by violence and instability, school can also provide routine, trusted relationships and a sense of normality that supports recovery.

> "PRIMARY SCHOOL THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN, I RECKON, THE SPOT TO GET ME, BECAUSE I REMEMBERED EVERYTHING. I WOULD TALK ABOUT IT. NOW IT'S HIDDEN IN THE BACK, BACK, BACK OF MY MIND, WHERE IT'S HARD TO GET OR REMEMBER THE THINGS THAT'S HAPPENED."

Reinforcing findings from other recent Australian-based research (see, among others, Fitz-Gibbon, Tyler & Meyer, 2026; Stewart, Fitz-Gibbon & Roberts, 2025), the experiences shared by child victim-survivors in this study highlight both the potential and the limitations of current school-based responses to child victimisation.

A small number of the children interviewed had disclosed their victimisation to an adult at school, including to teachers and school counsellors. For these children, the school setting was both a place of potential safety and a site where trust could easily be broken depending on the response received. Importantly, for these young people they rarely spoke about trusting institutions; instead, they described trusting individual adults within the school environment. Whether a child chose to disclose often depended on having a teacher, wellbeing staff member or counsellor who had invested time in building a genuine relationship with them. This reinforces that effective school responses depend not only on policies and procedures, but on creating opportunities for sustained, trusting relationships between students and staff.

When asked what they would have liked their school to do, one child victim-survivor simply explained, "help me feel safe." This comment is reflective of the experience of several of the children interviewed. Yet more often than not, the young victim-survivors recounted feeling disappointed and let down by the adults they trusted within the school environment. There is a clear opportunity to strengthen the capacity of school staff to respond to disclosures with belief, sensitivity, and clear pathways to referral, safety, recovery and healing.

Building children's trust in schools also requires recognising the barriers that discourage disclosure. When asked whether they would have felt comfortable to disclose their victimisation to a teacher at school, one child victim-survivor remarked, "I don't trust them … I'm not close to them". This reflection, which was not unique among the children interviewed, highlights that supportive responses depend not only on embedding trauma-informed policies and training, but also on trust embedded into the everyday relationships between students and staff. Creating relational safety within schools, where children feel known, heard, and respected, is a prerequisite for meaningful early intervention and creating an environment where students feel supported to disclose experiences of violence and abuse.

Importantly, schools should not rely solely on children disclosing their experiences before support is provided. Many children experiencing violence may never disclose directly, particularly where trust has already been eroded or they do not recognise their experiences as abuse. This reinforces the importance of equipping school staff to identify behavioural, emotional and educational indicators that may signal a child is experiencing violence or abuse, and to respond proactively through trauma-informed inquiry, support and referral rather than waiting for an explicit disclosure.

In addition to improving responses to disclosures and opportunities for young people to seek help within the school environment, reflecting findings from other recent research (including Fitz-Gibbon, 2025a in South Australia), the interviews also revealed mixed experiences among children of receiving Respectful Relationships Education (RRE). Some children reported that the content felt disconnected from their lived experience of violence and abuse, or was delivered in ways that did not invite open discussion and subsequent disclosure of victimisation. The experience of RRE was not universally negative among child victims interviewed though. Other young people valued RRE for helping them recognise unhealthy behaviours in their own lives and understand that violence is never acceptable. These divergent experiences highlight opportunities to strengthen both the consistency and quality of RRE across Australian schools. They also reinforce the need for RRE to be sufficiently responsive to the realities of children already experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence, rather than assuming violence is something children may encounter only in the future.

These findings align with recommended actions arising from the aforementioned recent national consultation. That work, which involved consultations with over 200 Australian stakeholders, identified strengthening RRE as a priority action needed to advance prevention efforts under the forthcoming Second Action Plan (Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026). In particular, the consultation highlighted the need for curriculum content that reflects children's lived experiences of violence and abuse as well as the contemporary issues and challenges in their lives, alongside greater investment in teacher capability, and safe school-based disclosure pathways for child victim-survivors (Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026).

These findings also suggest that the effectiveness of RRE depends not simply on whether it is delivered, but on how relevant it feels to children's lived experiences. For children experiencing domestic and family violence, programs that explicitly address family violence, coercive control, child victimisation, children's rights and pathways for help-seeking appear more likely to support children to recognise abuse, understand that they are not responsible for the violence they experience, and encourage earlier disclosure and access to support. Ensuring that RRE reflects the realities of children's lives is essential if it is to function as both a prevention and early intervention strategy.

The need to enhance RRE curriculum was also recognised by the practitioners interviewed, particularly in light of the high prevalence rates of experiences and use of domestic, family and sexual violence among young people in the Australian community. One practitioner commented:

> ***"A lot of children have experienced FDV [family and domestic violence] either from their parents or from their own personal relationships, definitely more education and more supports would be good … teaching teenagers what healthy relationships look like so they don't perpetrate or don't get into abusive relationships themselves … telling kids that's not ok."***

Taken together, these findings reinforce that schools should be recognised as central partners in preventing and responding to child victimisation. Realising this potential will require sustained investment in workforce capability, specialist wellbeing supports, clear child-centred disclosure and referral pathways, and high-quality, evidence-informed Respectful Relationships Education that reflects children's lived experiences. Strengthening these elements would position schools not only as settings for prevention, but also as places where children experiencing violence are recognised earlier, supported to seek help safely, and connected to the services they need to recover and heal.



"I WAS 10 … I WAS AT SCHOOL AND TOLD A COUNSELLOR IN MY SCHOOL … JUST BROKE DOWN, JUST TOLD EVERYTHING. NOTHING REALLY HAPPENED, JUST GOT PUSHED OFF."



EMBEDDING EDUCATION SUPPORTS INTO REFUGES AND SAFE HOUSING INITIATIVES

“I’VE BEEN TO ABOUT 13 SCHOOLS … BECAUSE I MOVED HOUSES. I HAVEN’T REALLY SETTLED INTO ANY SCHOOL.”

Recognising the risk of school disengagement among children and young people who have experienced domestic, family and sexual violence (see further Fitz-Gibbon, Tyler & Meyer, 2026), there is an opportunity to better support school engagement and continuity among at-risk children and young people by embedding education supports into crisis accommodation, including refuges and other safe housing initiatives. This would aim to minimise the risk of disengagement from education among these young victim-survivors, to support ongoing learning and school re-entry, and where possible, to avoid longer-term school refusal. This could take the form of a Children’s Educational Support Worker, as currently embedded in the Sanctuary Model delivered by Safe Steps (with this position funded by the Tomisich Foundation).

The importance of embedding educational supports within crisis accommodation was also recognised in the national consultation project. Stakeholders highlighted the need for integrated housing and support models that recognise educational continuity as central to children’s safety, stability and recovery, including practical assistance to maintain school engagement and support re-entry following periods of disruption (Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026).

This role could also support school re-entry for young victim-survivors who, by virtue of their circumstances and experiences, have spent significant periods of time out of school environments. For example, one young victim-survivor interviewed described her hesitance to return to school after a long period of time away:

> ***"Some people would like me to go back to school … I think, yeah, two years at home … they just want to support me in school and probably not out of school, because they're just too busy in their own world out of school … I don't really want to go back to school but the whole world is pushing me to go back to school."***

Embedding educational support within safe housing initiatives could also ensure that learning continuity becomes a core part of crisis response and recovery for children and young people experiencing and escaping violence.

Educational engagement is critical not only for longer-term wellbeing, employment, and social participation, but it also provides immediate protective benefits by restoring daily structure, peer connection, and a sense of normality for young people during and after experiences of trauma, including violence and abuse. In practice, this function could take a range of forms depending on local context and resources. It might be delivered as an expanded role for existing children and young people's practitioners within refuges, or as a shared position serving a number of services within a region or catchment. In either configuration, the role would act as a bridge between the domestic and family violence, child and family, and education sectors, supporting individual children's learning needs, facilitating school re-entry, and helping to upskill educators to identify and refer children affected by domestic and family violence.

Importantly, these roles could also support children and families to navigate school enrolment and transfer processes, coordinate with education providers to minimise disruptions to learning, facilitate access to flexible or alternative education pathways where required, and advocate for trauma-informed adjustments to support children's continued engagement in education during and following periods of crisis.

Supporting continued engagement in learning and school has immediate benefits for protecting the safety and wellbeing of the child, as well as longer-term benefits that align with the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032, in particular its fourth pillar focus on recovery and healing (DSS, 2022). Embedding education supports in refuge settings would also contribute to achieving broader national commitments on children's wellbeing and rights, including under Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031 (DSS, 2021), and the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education Inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment.



"I LOVED SCHOOL … I'VE TRIED TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL, BUT BECAUSE OF HOW MUCH I DID MISS OF SCHOOL, I CAN'T GO BACK."



THE IMPORTANCE OF FOSTERING CONNECTIONS WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Throughout the interviews, child victim-survivors often spoke about the vital role that family and friends play in supporting their sense of belonging and emotional wellbeing. For several of the children interviewed, these relationships provided stability and comfort during what they described as otherwise unstable periods in their lives. However, repeated relocations, changes in schooling, and disruptions to family networks often fractured these important connections. One young person, who had attended seven different schools over the time they were experiencing violence, reflected on the cumulative toll of this disconnection:

> ***"You make really good friends and [then] they got to not be friends anymore because you move ... it gets annoying after some time."***

For others, the absence of social connections further exacerbated feelings of isolation. As one child victim-survivor explained:

> ***"I wasn't very social, so I didn't have any friends ... I had no one else to talk to ... I felt very caged and maybe I had no one else to help."***

These accounts highlight that the impacts of domestic and family violence victimisation for children and young people extend well beyond the violence itself. Frequent moves, changing schools and disrupted family relationships can progressively erode the social connections that are most protective for children. In this way, violence not only exposes children to harm but also removes many of the relationships that might otherwise support their resilience, recovery and sense of belonging.

Even when friendships were maintained, secrecy around experiences of violence often created barriers to openness and trust within those connections. One young person described:

> ***"Basically, all my friends noticed. But I'd give them pretty good excuses … the excuses would come and continuously come. Yeah, it felt like I was playing a game with charades, almost."***

The interviews also reinforce that friendships should not be viewed simply as a positive aspect of childhood, but as an important protective factor for children and young people. Friends provided children with opportunities to experience normality, emotional support, distraction from violence and abuse, and, for some, their first opportunity to disclose their victimisation. Maintaining these connections wherever it is safe to do so should therefore be considered an important objective of crisis, housing, social service and education responses to child victimisation.

For several of the children interviewed, communication via digital spaces provided a crucial way to sustain these connections when physical distance intervened:

> ***"I usually communicate with my friends online … so I can keep talking to them [after I move]."***

These findings reinforce that maintaining children's social and family connections should be recognised as a core component of child-centred responses to domestic and family violence, rather than an optional consideration once immediate safety has been secured. Decisions about housing, school transitions and service responses should explicitly consider the potential impact on children's relationships with siblings, extended family, friends, trusted adults and community networks. Wherever it is safe and appropriate to do so, supporting children to maintain these connections can strengthen resilience, reduce isolation and provide an important foundation for long-term recovery and wellbeing



FREQUENT MOVES, CHANGING SCHOOLS AND DISRUPTED FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS CAN PROGRESSIVELY ERODE THE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS THAT ARE MOST PROTECTIVE FOR CHILDREN.



UNDERSTANDING YOUNG PEOPLE'S HEALING AND RECOVERY NEEDS

Towards the end of each interview, and reflecting the Recovery and Healing pillar of the National Plan (DSS, 2022), children were asked what would help them recover and heal from the violence and abuse they had experienced. Strikingly, many child victim-survivors responded to this question with silence, uncertainty or difficulty identifying what recovery or healing meant to them. This finding is significant in itself. Rather than indicating an absence of hope or resilience, it suggests that the language commonly used by policymakers, practitioners and researchers may not reflect the ways children themselves understand life after violence.

When invited instead to talk about what they wanted for themselves in the future, or what helped them feel better, children rarely spoke about recovery in abstract or therapeutic terms. Instead, they described wanting to feel safe, happy, believed, connected, listened to and able to enjoy ordinary aspects of childhood. Their responses suggest that children who have experienced violence experience recovery not as a distinct stage following violence, but as the gradual restoration of safety, trust, stability, relationships and opportunities to simply be children.

These findings reinforce the importance of designing child-centred recovery systems that begin with children's own priorities and language. Rather than organising supports solely around adult-defined concepts of recovery and healing, services should focus on creating the everyday conditions that children themselves identify as important: feeling safe, remaining connected to family and friends, participating in school and community life, rebuilding trust in adults, and having opportunities for play, learning and belonging. For children, these experiences are not separate from recovery, they are recovery.

Practitioner interviews reinforced this interpretation. Practitioners described children's healing as relational, developmental and non-linear, emphasising that recovery is supported through continuity of care, trusted relationships, opportunities for play and learning, and environments characterised by safety and predictability. Their reflections aligned closely with the priorities identified by child participants, reinforcing that recovery is best understood not as a single intervention or service, but as a sustained process of rebuilding children's everyday lives following violence and abuse. These findings also complement the recommendations arising from the national consultation undertaken to inform the Second Action Plan, which identified the need for sustained, flexible and developmentally appropriate recovery and healing supports for children and young people. In particular, the consultation highlighted that recovery is rarely linear, and that children's needs can change significantly over time, requiring service responses that extend beyond short-term therapeutic interventions or the immediate period of crisis (Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026).

FOR CHILDREN, THESE EXPERIENCES ARE NOT SEPARATE FROM RECOVERY, THEY ARE RECOVERY.





04

IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL POLICY

These findings reinforce that implementing the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032 (DSS, 2022), including the development of the Second Action Plan, requires more than recognising children as victim-survivors in their own right in principle. It requires redesigning policy and service systems around children's own experiences, priorities and understandings of safety, trust, stability and recovery. Throughout the interviews, children consistently described the importance of trusted relationships, stable homes and schools, accessible pathways to help, meaningful participation in decisions affecting them, and opportunities to remain connected to family, friends and community. These priorities must shape the implementation of the Second Action Plan and future reforms across governments to ensure the commitments to recognising children and young people as 'victim-survivors in their own right' are translated into meaningful improvements in their everyday experiences of seeking safety and support.

Taken together, the findings of this study and the national consultation undertaken to inform the Second Action Plan (Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026) identify a clear and actionable agenda for reform. This includes establishing and sustainably funding specialist responses for children and young people experiencing violence and abuse, strengthening workforce capability to recognise and respond to children's disclosures, improving access to safe and stable housing, embedding educational continuity within crisis responses, and ensuring that children can access longer-term recovery and healing supports. Importantly, delivering these reforms requires sustained investment, coordination across education, housing, health and specialist domestic and family violence services, and mechanisms to measure improvements in children's safety, wellbeing, educational engagement and recovery, rather than relying solely on indicators of service activity or policy implementation.

The findings from this study speak directly to Pillar Two of the National Plan: Early Intervention, which emphasises the importance of identifying and responding to early signs of violence before escalation (DSS, 2022). Early intervention should not rely upon children recognising abuse and navigating service systems independently. Instead, it requires universal settings, including schools, health services and community organisations, to proactively identify children experiencing violence, respond safely to disclosures, and connect children with specialist supports before harms and risks escalate. The study findings reinforce the importance of investing in workforce capability, child-centred disclosure pathways and specialist supports embedded within the settings children already know and trust. Within this, strengthening trauma-informed practice and referral pathways within education and systems which interact with children and young people could be a core focus of the forthcoming Second Action Plan (2027–2032). Investment in school-based interventions, including an update of Respectful Relationships Education (RRE) and the introduction of Children's Educational Support Workers within safe housing initiatives, represents tangible actions which would support earlier and more meaningful interventions for child victim-survivors.

Under Pillar Four: Recovery and Healing, the National Plan commits to improving access to specialist, trauma-informed, and child-centred services. The study findings highlight the need to ensure that safe housing, education, and therapeutic supports for children are not seen as ancillary, but as core components of recovery and healing. Embedding stability, trust, and connection as indicators of safety for children who have experienced domestic and family violence aligns directly with this pillar's outcome areas of "enhanced recovery and long-term wellbeing" and "increased accessibility of holistic, integrated supports."

Importantly, the findings highlight the ongoing absence of accessible, youth-friendly information about help-seeking pathways and available supports. As restrictions on social media use are implemented in Australia for children, there is a need to develop alternative mechanisms for reaching young people with information on safety, their rights, and available supports. Coordinated investment and resource development across education, community, and digital sectors is needed to ensure that children have access to clear and confidential ways to access information and to seek help.

The First Action Plan outlines the need to improve housing and homelessness responses (DSS, 2023). This study reaffirms the need for crisis and transitional accommodation to be designed with children's specific needs at the centre. A safe home for a child is not only one that provides physical security, but one that enables continuity in education, opportunities for play and connection, and consistent access to trusted adults. Integrating educational and wellbeing supports into refuge and housing models would advance the Action Plan's commitment to build a connected and coordinated service system that supports long-term recovery and stability for victim-survivors, including children and young people.

Relevance to the development of the Second Action Plan (2027–2032), these findings call for a renewed national focus on children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right. This includes embedding dedicated actions to strengthen child-specific crisis responses, ensure consistent education and housing supports across state and territory jurisdictions, and establish national standards for engaging children's voices in policy and service design. Doing so would not only advance the National Plan's goal of ending violence against women and children in one generation, it would also affirm the right of every child in Australia to live in safety, stability, and dignity.



IMPLICATIONS OF THE HOUSING AFFORDABILITY CRISIS

Practitioners consistently identified Australia's housing affordability crisis as one of the greatest barriers to improving outcomes for children and young people experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence. While safe housing is often understood as a crisis response, practitioners described it as the foundation upon which children's safety, stability, education, recovery and long-term wellbeing depend. Without secure housing, many of the other supports children require become significantly more difficult to access or sustain.

Specifically, practitioners identified the lack of available, affordable housing as one of the most significant structural barriers to recovery for children and young people escaping violence. They observed that when refuge or crisis accommodation stays are extended due to housing shortages, children's sense of stability and normality is further disrupted, undermining their capacity to recover and rebuild trust. The consequences of this extend well beyond housing itself. Practitioners reported young people experiencing homelessness after escaping violence and relying more frequently on temporary or unsafe arrangements such as couch surfing with extended family or friends.

These practitioners described families that are remaining in emergency accommodation for longer periods of time as rental prices escalate and the availability of social housing diminishes. Practitioners also highlighted the distinct risks facing adolescents and young people who are transitioning towards independence. Limited access to affordable housing can leave older adolescents particularly vulnerable to homelessness, exploitation or remaining in, or returning to, abusive intimate partner relationships simply because those relationships provide access to accommodation. As one practitioner reflected, young people are often "stuck in those relationships because they don't have anywhere to live." These findings reinforce the importance of housing policy as a violence prevention strategy, particularly for young people navigating the transition to adulthood.

The current housing affordability crisis amplifies risk and prolongs cycles of violence. For children and adolescents escaping violence, the absence of affordable, child-appropriate accommodation options has immediate safety and longer-term wellbeing impacts. Practitioners stressed that without housing security, it is difficult for children to re-engage in education, access therapeutic supports, or establish a consistent and trusting relationship with a support worker.

Addressing these challenges will require more than increasing the supply of affordable housing. Governments should invest in medium and long-term housing pathways specifically designed for families and young people affected by domestic, family and sexual violence, alongside integrated models that embed educational supports, therapeutic services, case management and specialist domestic and family violence expertise. Housing responses should be designed to minimise disruption to children's education, social connections and developmental needs, recognising these as essential components of recovery rather than secondary considerations.

The importance of addressing housing insecurity as part of children's recovery and healing was also identified in the recent national consultation project undertaken to inform the Second Action Plan (Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026). The consultation recommended expanding access to safe and stable housing, including transitional housing, Youth Foyers and specialist accommodation, alongside integrated supports responsive to children's educational, therapeutic and developmental needs. Particular attention was directed towards unaccompanied children and young people escaping violence, for whom the absence of safe and affordable housing can create significant barriers to securing safety and accessing ongoing support (Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026, see also Ellard et al., 2025).

As Federal, state and territory governments develop the Second Action Plan (2027–2032) under the National Plan, there is a critical opportunity to better position housing as a cornerstone of Australia's response to children experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence. This should include measurable targets to increase the supply of affordable housing for families and young people escaping violence, alongside dedicated investment in child-centred housing models that promote continuity in education, trusted relationships and access to specialist supports. Delivering these reforms will require genuine cross-portfolio collaboration between housing, education, community services and specialist domestic and family violence sectors, alongside investment in youth-specific housing models that recognise the distinct developmental needs of adolescents. Ultimately, secure housing is not simply an outcome of an effective response to violence; it is one of the essential conditions that enables children to recover, participate and thrive.

"YOUNG PEOPLE ARE OFTEN STUCK IN THOSE RELATIONSHIPS BECAUSE THEY DON'T HAVE ANYWHERE TO LIVE."



THE VALUE OF A CHILD RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

Reimagining crisis responses to domestic and family violence through children's eyes requires more than listening to their stories – it requires recognising and upholding their rights. A child rights-based approach, grounded in obligations set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), positions children not as passive recipients of care or protection, but as individuals in their own right with inherent dignity, agency, and entitlements to safety, participation, and respect. Taken collectively, the UNCRC, the National Plan (DSS, 2022), the National Framework (DSS, 2021), and the National Strategy (National Office for Child Safety, 2021) affirm that Australian children have a right to protection from violence, to education and health, and to have their best interests as a primary consideration in all actions concerning them. Ensuring that crisis, recovery and healing responses are underpinned by children's rights principles reinforces these commitments and creates coherence across national agendas on safety and wellbeing.

The findings from this study illustrate the practical importance of this approach. Children's accounts consistently demonstrated that when their views were dismissed, their disclosures were not acted upon, or decisions were made without their involvement, they experienced not only further harm but also a profound erosion of trust in the adults and systems intended to protect them. Conversely, where children felt listened to, believed and meaningfully included, they described greater feelings of safety, trust and wellbeing. These experiences reinforce that children's rights are not abstract legal principles, they have direct implications for children's safety, recovery and long-term outcomes.

Adopting this framing means recognising children as rights holders whose individual needs and perspectives must inform every stage of policy and practice reform, design, and delivery. Viewing domestic and family violence through this lens requires governments and service systems to move beyond adult-centric understandings and genuinely account for how children experience and are impacted by experiences of violence in their own right.

Upholding the right to be heard, and to participate in all manners that impact them, is one important element of this broader obligation. This requires practitioners and decision-makers to create spaces of trust where children feel valued and believed, but there is also a responsibility to ensure that those voices lead to tangible change. A child rights-based framework also embeds the principle of best interests: that every decision affecting a child must prioritise their physical, emotional, and developmental wellbeing. Importantly, participation extends beyond inviting children to express their views. In the context of domestic and family violence victimisation, this means ensuring that responses do not merely remove children from immediate harm, but enable them to be supported to recover and heal from that experience. This requires ensuring children understand the decisions being made, are provided with age-appropriate information about their options, and can influence decisions affecting their safety, education, housing and support wherever possible.

Applying a rights lens also demands systemic accountability, including by bringing a focus to the structural obligations of government and service systems. Respecting and upholding all children's rights requires housing, education, justice, and child protection systems to work collaboratively to provide coherent, age-appropriate, and accessible pathways to safety and recovery. Within this, and as part of broader calls for transparent measurement of the outcomes of the National Plan (DSS, 2022) (see, among others, Fitz-Gibbon, 2024; Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026), there is a need to measure progress specific to child victim-survivors across each of the pillars of prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing. Embedding and measuring child-specific outcomes would provide a more meaningful assessment of progress towards achieving a system response that truly does respond to children as victims in their own right. Such measures should extend beyond service access and activity to assess whether children experience improvements in safety and stability, continuity of education, access to trusted relationships and age-appropriate supports, and opportunities for longer-term recovery and healing. Importantly, children's own assessments of whether services have met their needs should form a central component of evaluating the effectiveness of crisis and recovery responses.

Ultimately, the child victim-survivors who participated in this study described a vision of recovery that was remarkably clear: they wanted to feel safe, be believed, remain connected to the people they love, stay at school, and have trusted adults who listened and acted. These are not extraordinary aspirations. They are the foundations of childhood. Ensuring that every child experiencing domestic and family violence has access to these foundations should be a defining ambition of the Second Action Plan and Australia's broader efforts to end gender-based violence in one generation.



THESE ARE NOT EXTRAORDINARY ASPIRATIONS. THEY ARE THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHILDHOOD.



05

WHERE TO NEXT?

FROM RECOGNITION TO ACTION: TURNING CHILDREN'S VOICES INTO NATIONAL CHANGE

The children and young people in this study were clear about what they need: to be believed, to feel safe, to have stable homes and schooling, and to stay connected to the people who matter to them. Hearing this is an important first step. Responding to it requires action from governments, services and communities.

Following this research, 54 reasons commissioned experts Kate Fitz-Gibbon and Matt Tyler to lead a national consultation to support development of the Second Action Plan (2027–2032) under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032. The consultation engaged more than 200 stakeholders across Australia, including young people, practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and Children's Commissioners. It was informed by the experiences shared by the 17 children and young people interviewed for this study.

The resulting report, *From Recognition to Action* (Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2026), starts from an important milestone: the recognition of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right. It finds that this recognition represents real progress, but a significant gap remains between policy commitments and children's everyday experiences of seeking safety and support. It also finds strong agreement about what needs to change. Children, services, researchers, inquiries and reviews have been identifying many of the same problems and solutions for years.

FROM RECOGNITION TO ACTION IDENTIFIES 20 ACTIONS GOVERNMENTS CAN TAKE NOW, UNDER SIX THEMES.

1 **Prevent violence against children before it occurs**

Develop Australia's first national prevention framework, strengthen Respectful Relationships Education, and end legislative protections for the physical punishment of children.

What children told us: Several children did not recognise their experiences as violence or abuse until it had happened "again and again", and experiences of Respectful Relationships Education were mixed.

2 **Intervene earlier and remove barriers to help-seeking**

Review parental consent and mandatory reporting laws, and invest in accessible early intervention, including tailored responses for boys who have experienced violence and abuse.

What children told us: Many children's first disclosures were met with disbelief or inaction, and many did not know where to turn for support.

3 **Ensure child victim-survivors can access specialist support**

Establish specialist services in every jurisdiction, equip the broader workforce to identify and respond safely to child victimisation, and fund services at a level that reflects the scale of need.

What children told us: Children described fragmented supports and few clear entry points. Where trusted school counsellors and practitioners were available, they made a real difference.

4 **Provide long-term support for recovery and healing**

Guarantee access to long-term therapeutic and mental health support, strengthen recovery pathways for young people in and leaving out-of-home care, and expand access to safe housing and wraparound supports.

What children told us: Children described repeated moves through temporary housing, disrupted schooling and lost friendships. They understood recovery as the gradual return of safety, stability and everyday childhood.

5 **Create clear national leadership and accountability for children's safety**

Re-establish a Federal Minister for Children, embed Closing the Gap commitments, and better integrate national strategies addressing violence and abuse experienced by children and young people.

What children told us: This study calls for stability, trust and connection to be recognised as indicators of children's safety, and for child-specific outcomes to be measured across every pillar of the National Plan.

6 **Put children's rights and voices at the centre of decision-making**

Embed children's rights in law and funding, establish national participation standards, and ensure children and young people have a meaningful role in implementing and monitoring the Second Action Plan.

What children told us: Where children felt listened to, believed and included in decisions, they described greater feelings of safety, trust and wellbeing.

Read together, the two reports offer both the why and the how. This report shows what children and young people need; From Recognition to Action sets out how governments can deliver it.

You can read From Recognition to Action at: bit.ly/frta-2026

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A SAFE HOME SHOULD NOT BE A DREAM, NOR AN ASPIRATION. IT SHOULD BE A REALITY FOR ALL AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN.



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