

Driving cultural change throughout Victoria's child protection system

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

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

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

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

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

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

What is this study about?

This report presents findings from research into the experiences of mothers seeking the return of their children into their care within the Victorian Child Protection system and the community legal practitioners who assist and represent them. All thirty mothers involved in this study were affected by domestic and family violence.

The research explores the issues mothers were asked to address when working towards reunification, their relationships with Child Protection caseworkers and any help mothers received from support services during the reunification process.



Stronger Together

The need for a strength-based approach to enable children to thrive

*"They don't write anything nice about you. They don't write anything about you know, being a positive parent or, yeah, the child has a great bond."
- Sam, mother of 1*

Better outcomes for children and strong parent-child relationships are more likely to be achieved through collaborative relationships with client families and supporting parents to address protective concerns while families remain intact. Child Protection responses should centre on strengthening parenting capacity and mother-child relationships, including where children cannot remain in, or be returned to, their mothers' care.

Embed trauma and DFV informed practice

*I have lots of clients who read the material about their experience with family violence and feel like they're experiencing it again and being blamed for things that were out of their control... They feel like Child Protection are blaming - they feel blamed again for something that has occurred to them - something traumatic that's occurred to them. -
Community legal centre practitioner*

Recovery from DFV is complex and takes time. It is a long-term process that extends beyond the initial crisis response. The support and recovery needs of victim-survivors do not end when an abusive relationship or its immediate violence ends. Where families involved in Child Protection are affected by DFV, Child Protection responses must identify, recognise and respond to the enduring impact of DFV on the family. Child Protection intervention should take a holistic approach to meet the immediate and ongoing support needs of child and adult victim-survivors. This holistic approach requires timely referrals to specialist supports services, comprehensive wrap around support to address trauma recovery needs and flexible reunification timeframes to ensure outcomes in the child's best interests.

Bringing abusive fathers back into carer arrangements

On the intervention order it's my name and both of my kids. And Child Protection told Children's Court that they have assessed [abusive ex-husband's name] ...and they find the kids to be safe around him. - Anne, mother of 2

Where families involved in Child Protection are affected by DFV, Child Protection responses should include a focus on perpetrator visibility, engagement and accountability, including the short- and long-term impacts of the perpetrator's violent behaviour on affected family members. The placement of children in the (temporary) care of an abusive parent is likely to have significant negative effects on their social, emotional and physical wellbeing.

Cross-sector service integration to support trauma recovery

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

Children and parents affected by DFV are likely to require a range of specialist and universal support services throughout their involvement with Child Protection. Strong cross sector collaboration is needed to ensure identification of support needs, provide access to a range of services including legal assistance and support child and adult victim-survivors to recover from DFV.

Transparent communication and decision-making

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

Where DFV is present in families involved with Child Protection, worker consistency is critical. Trauma, such as DFV, can complicate trust building. This study indicates that consistent communication and support is essential to engage parent victim-survivors in Child Protection processes. Families need to know what they should expect when they work with a caseworker.

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

Clear, effective and transparent communication about Child Protection processes is a system responsibility. This study indicates that legal assistance can provide greater transparency around Child Protection decision-making and support parental engagement.

Recommendations

Outcome: Strengths-based care for children and their families

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

Outcome: Embedding trauma and DFV informed practice

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



Outcome: Cross-sector service integration to support trauma recovery

8. Develop and implement an early intervention pilot program involving Child Protection and Women's Legal Services Victoria to strengthen engagement and communication with mothers experiencing family violence.

9. Establish a cross-sectorial working group to facilitate cross-sector collaboration and enable stakeholders to contribute to strategic policy goals and shared practice.

10. Provide additional funding to DFV specialists and children/family services to strengthen cross-sector collaborations, ensure timely referrals and support DFV trauma recovery.

Outcome: Working with parents/carers who are perpetrators

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

Outcome: Early assistance and meaningful intervention

12. Ensure Child Protection practitioners facilitate early assistance for parents/carers to build family functioning as well as timely referrals based on individual needs assessments.

13. Establish comprehensive referral pathways between Child Protection and appropriate services to facilitate proactive, integrated support for children and families.

14. Provide resourcing to expand early intervention models that are independently evaluated and prove effective in achieving family preservation and reunification.

Outcome: Greater accountability and systems transparency

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

Outcome: Child-focused reunification timeframes

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

