



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

A new approach to programs for families and children

Discussion Paper



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A new approach to programs for families and children

Every year, the Australian Government invests more than \$300 million in child and family programs through the Department of Social Services (the department). But we know families are facing more complex challenges, and the way we deliver supports requires a better, more coordinated response.

We've listened to service providers, community organisations, families and caregivers. They've told us the current system is too rigid, too fragmented, and too bureaucratic.

In response, we're proposing a new national program that brings five existing programs together. This will make it easier for families to get help when they need it most.

The new program aims to:

- Fund a wide range of high-quality, evidence-informed services – from general community support to targeted help for children and families during times of crisis.
- Make grant and reporting processes simpler, so organisations can spend more time supporting families and less time filling out forms.
- Strengthen services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

This reform is about ensuring every child, and every family has access to the tools they need to lead healthier, happier lives.

The Australian Government is seeking your views on the proposed changes outlined in this Discussion Paper. Details on how you can have your say are on page 8. We've also included discussion questions, starting from page 9.

The proposal

A single national program will be created to support children and families. It will replace these five existing Australian Government programs:

- Children and Parenting Support (CaPS)
- Communities for Children Facilitating Partners (CfC FP)
- Family Mental Health Support Services (FMHSS)
- Family and Relationship Services (FaRS)
- Specialised Family Violence Services (SFVS)



The new program will fund services that take an evidence-informed approach, drawing on research, professional expertise, and the lived experiences of children and families to shape policies. Many services are already doing this well, and we want to support and expand that good work across the country.

We want to make it easier for providers to respond to the needs of their local communities. Longer-term funding agreements of up to five years will give organisations the stability to focus on delivering high-quality services and achieve more ambitious goals.

To help improve services over time, all providers working directly with clients will report through the department's Data Exchange (DEX). This will help us better understand outcomes and make sure support is reaching those who need it most.

Any organisation will be welcome to apply for funding under the new program. Grants will be awarded through an open and competitive process. When applying, providers can advise if they would like to be considered for a relational contract with the department, or if they would prefer a standard grant agreement. You can find details on relational contracting on page 6.

Program structure

The new program will support activities that contribute to two key outcomes:

1. Parents and caregivers are empowered to raise healthy, resilient children.
2. Children are supported to grow into healthy, resilient adults.

We know these outcomes take time – and that many factors shape the lives of children and families. That's why the program is designed to be flexible and responsive.

Funding applications will be assessed under three activity streams:

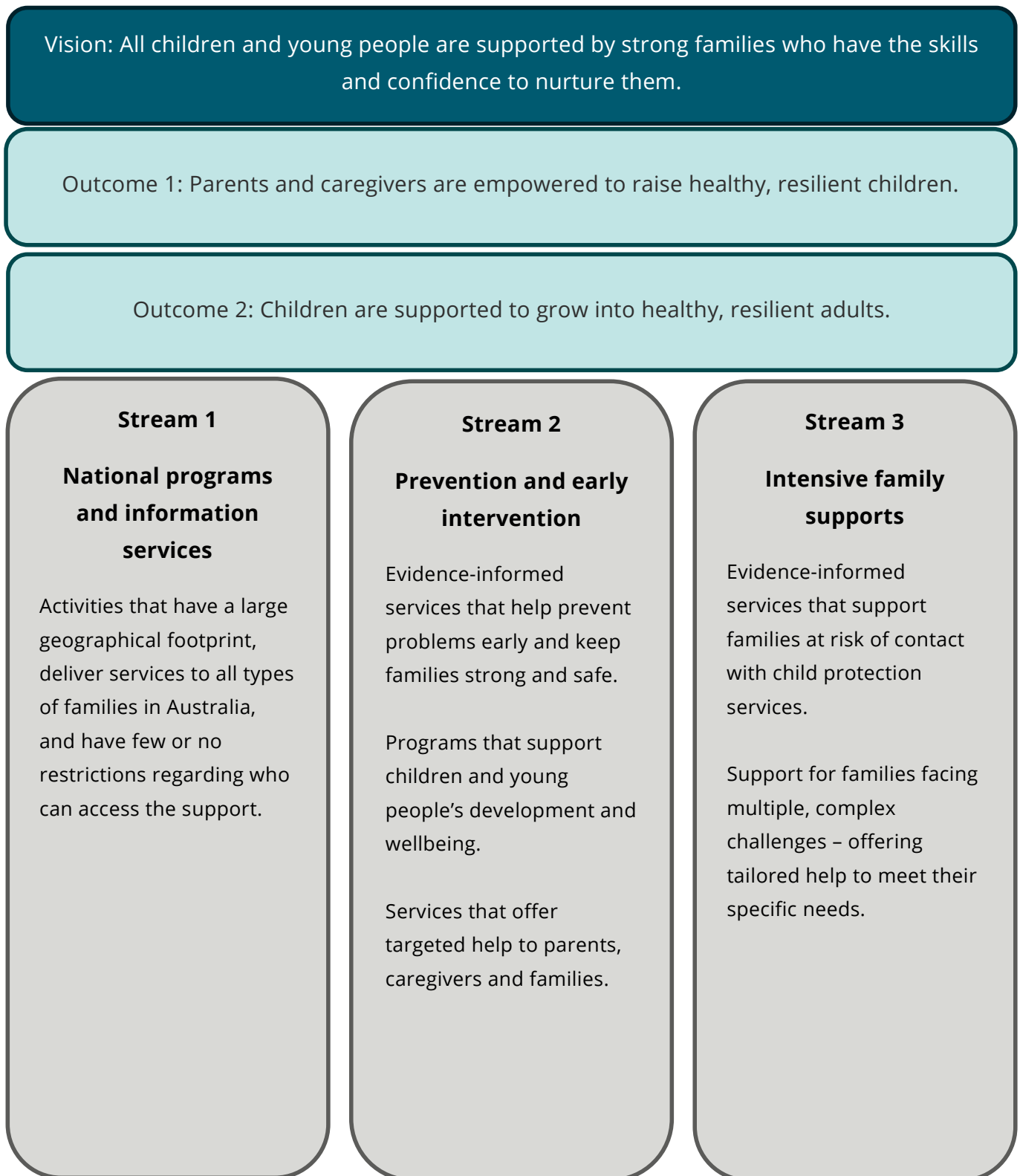
- National programs and information services – making sure families across Australia have access to trusted advice and resources, wherever they live.
- Prevention and early intervention – supporting families early, before challenges escalate.
- Intensive family supports – for families who need more targeted, wraparound support.

When applying, providers will nominate the stream that best fits their services. If successful, they will receive one grant agreement under the new program – even if they deliver services across multiple streams. This approach gives providers the flexibility to adapt and respond to the changing needs of families and communities over time.

Figure 1 is a visual diagram of this program structure.



Figure 1: Visual of the program structure





Prioritising investment

The Australian Government's priorities are to:

1. Invest early to improve family wellbeing, break cycles of disadvantage, and reduce the need for later interventions – like child protection.
2. Prioritise connected, co-located, and integrated services that work together to meet family needs.
3. Ensure services are informed by, and respond to, community needs.
4. Improve outcomes for First Nations children and families by increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations (also called ACCOs) delivering supports in locations with high First Nations populations.

You can find more detail about these priorities below. If you'd like to understand the research and evidence behind them, you can read the **Evidence Summary**.

Improving family wellbeing

Supporting children and families to build strong social connections and emotional wellbeing is at the heart of the new program. The focus is on practical activities that give parents and caregivers the tools, knowledge and confidence to raise healthy, resilient children.

Key areas of interest will be:

- Families at risk of child protection involvement.
- Prevention and early intervention support for children aged 0-5 years.
- Young parents aged under 25.

The department will continue funding services that support children through childhood and adolescence, recognising that important transitions and challenges for children and families don't stop after the age of five.

Connected, co-located, and integrated services

The new program encourages service providers to work together to meet community needs. This could include partnering with other organisations or co-locating services so families can get help in one place.

Grant applications that show strong local partnerships, co-location of services or genuine integration will be looked at favourably.

Services informed by, and responding to, community need

To get the best outcomes for children and families, services need to reflect the needs of their local communities. When applying, providers should show how they've considered their community's unique context.



This could include:

- Strong local partnerships with other service providers.
- A diverse and active volunteer base.
- Local governance that involves community leaders or people with lived experience.

Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

Culturally safe, community-led services are the best way to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Governments have committed to progressing Priority Reform 2 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap – building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector. But the Productivity Commission’s 2024 [review](#) shows we need to do more.

Under the proposed program, funding will prioritise ACCO-led service delivery in communities with significant First Nations populations. This will follow the [Closing the Gap Grants Prioritisation Guide](#).

Non-Indigenous organisations can still work in partnership or sub-contract with ACCOs. However, in areas with significant First Nations populations, it is preferred that ACCOs lead service delivery where possible.

Assessing community need

Grant applications will also be assessed based on community need. To understand need, the department will use key data sources, including:

- Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) – to identify areas facing disadvantage.
- Australia Early Development Census (AEDC) – to understand how children are developing in different communities.
- Census data - including how many children and families live in an area, and how many young people are not in education, employment, or training (NEET).
- Child protection engagement rates – to highlight where prevention and family support services may be most needed.

Other factors may include whether similar services already exist in the area, and how high the demand is for support in that community.

Working together

The Australian Government understands that rigid funding rules can make it hard for providers to meet the real needs of their communities. In some cases, providers have had to adjust their services to fit strict criteria rather than responding to what families on the ground are asking for.

To address this, we will use the [Community Sector Grants Engagement Framework](#) to guide the new program. This includes streamlining reporting requirements, so providers can spend more time delivering services. The proposed changes are outlined below, and **Figure 2** provides an example of how the new program could improve the provider experience.



Streamlined reporting arrangements

Grant reporting

The new program aims to make reporting simpler and less time-consuming – especially for smaller grants. The goal is to reduce unnecessary paperwork and make milestone requirements easier to manage.

Even if a provider delivers multiple services under their funding agreement, they'll only have one contract and one set of reporting requirements.

Outcomes reporting

All providers offering direct, client-facing services will need to report outcomes through DEX. This helps the government understand who is receiving support, track what's working, and improve services to better meet the needs of communities.

Better qualitative reporting

The new program will also collect other qualitative data and information to show the real impact of services on children and families. The department will work with providers to share success stories through social media, speeches, reports and the Minister's and Assistant Minister's media channels so that services can learn from each other's successes.

Alternative ways of commissioning

The department will offer relational contracting in the new national program.

Relational contracting is a flexible approach to commissioning that focuses on shared goals, trust-based partnerships and long-term outcomes.

A relational contract should generally include:

- Clear governance and accountability.
- Flexibility to adapt to changing needs.
- A focus on outcomes, not just activities.

Any provider can express interest in a relational contract at application. During this consultation, we welcome feedback on relational contracting and suggestions for how the department can best implement this approach.



Figure 2: Provider experience – example

Current state

One provider funded through CaPS, FMHSS and SFVS

Services:

Small group family capacity building sessions at the local community centre to support parents to increase their parenting confidence (CaPS).

Online counselling for children and young people with early signs of mental illness (FMHSS).

Counselling at the local community centre for families and children who have experienced domestic and family violence (SFVS).

Future state

One provider funded under a single national program

Services:

Small group parenting program teaching relationship skills at the local community centre, targeted to young first-time parents (Stream 2).

Counselling for children and young people with early signs of mental illness – offered online and co-located with other services at the local community centre (Stream 2).

Counselling offered at the local community centre for families and children who have experienced domestic and family violence (Stream 3).

Current frustrations

Has three grant agreements with the department and multiple reporting requirements under each of these grant agreements.

Allocates staff effort each month to reporting and working with the department on compliance and administrative requirements under each grant agreement.

During peak reporting periods, some staff stop delivering services to help with the grant reporting and administrative processes.

Benefits

Only had to provide one grant application to the department, rather than three grant applications.

Has one grant agreement with the department with one set of reporting requirements.

Significantly reduced administrative burden, meaning more hours are spent delivering services to families and children.

Partners with local not-for-profits. All services are offered at the same community centre for ease of access.

Flexibility to offer counselling both online and in-person as the contract with the department is focused on outcomes, not the exact method of delivery.



Have your say

We want to hear your views on the proposed changes outlined in this paper. Your feedback will help shape the future of child and family services.

Appendix A includes suggested questions to guide your response. You can also take part in a townhall to discuss the changes, or complete a short Pulse Survey on the [DSS Engage website](#). The Survey closes on 5 December 2025.

To make a submission, register for a townhall, or learn more about the consultation process, visit [DSS Engage](#). You can choose to keep your submission confidential. Details on how your information will be used are available in the [Privacy Collection Notice](#).

The closing date for submissions is 5 December 2025.

Website: <http://www.engage.dss.gov.au>

Email: families@dss.gov.au

Mail: Families
GPO Box 9820
Department of Social Services
Canberra ACT 2601

Enquiries: All enquiries should be sent to families@dss.gov.au.

Note: The department is not seeking identifying information about someone else (third parties). If you choose to include identifying information about someone else, please obtain their consent beforehand and give them a copy of the department's privacy collection notice.

Please do not provide identifying information about children, victim-survivors, or alleged perpetrators of family violence even if you have their consent, as there are unique sensitivities associated with these cohorts.



Appendix A – Discussion Questions

Vision and outcomes

Does the new vision reflect what we all want for children and families?

Are the two main outcomes what we should be working towards for children and families?
Why/why not?

Outcome 1: Parents and caregivers are empowered to raise healthy, resilient children.

Outcome 2: Children are supported to grow into healthy, resilient adults.

Program structure

Will a single national program provide more flexibility for your organisation?

Does the service or activity you deliver fit within one of the three funding streams? Do these streams reflect what children and families in your community need now – and what they might need in the future?

Are there other changes we could make to the program to help your organisation or community overcome current challenges?

Prioritising investment

Do you agree that the four priorities listed on page 4 are the right areas for investment to improve outcomes for children and families?

Are there any other priorities or issues you think the department should be focussing on?

Improving family wellbeing

Do the proposed focus areas – like supporting families at risk of child protection involvement and young parents – match the needs or priorities of your service?

Are there other groups in your community, or different approaches, that you think the department should consider to better support family wellbeing?



Connected, co-located, and integrated services

What are other effective ways, beyond co-location, that you've seen work well to connect and coordinate services for families?

What would you highlight in a grant application to demonstrate a service is connected to the community it serves? What should applicants be assessed on?

Responding to community need

Beyond locational disadvantage, what other factors should the department consider to make sure funding reflects the needs of communities?

What's the best way for organisations to show in grant applications, that their service is genuinely meeting the needs of the community?

Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

How could the grant process be designed to support and increase the number of ACCOs delivering services to children and families?

What else should be built into the program design to help improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families?

Measuring outcomes

What types of data would help your organisation better understand its impact and continuously improve its services?

What kinds of data or information would be most valuable for you to share, to show how your service is positively impacting children and families?

If your organisation currently reports in the Data Exchange (DEX), what SCORE Circumstances domain is most relevant to the service you deliver?

What kinds of templates or guidance would help you prepare strong case studies that show the impact of your service?



Working together

What does a relational contracting approach mean to you in practice? What criteria would you like to see included in a relational contract?

What's the best way for the department to decide which organisations should be offered a relational contract?

Is your organisation interested in a relational contracting approach? Why/why not?

Other

Is there anything else you think the department should understand or consider about this proposed approach?



Appendix B – The new approach at a glance

