



A New Approach to Programs for Families and Children Consultation Submission December 2025

Interrelate welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the new national approach to programs for children and families. Our submission reflects a century of service to Australian families.

*We strongly support the Government's vision that **all children and young people are supported by strong families who have the skills and confidence to nurture them***

This vision is deeply connected to Interrelate's mission and the outcomes we strive for in every community we serve.

Support for the Two Proposed Outcomes

The proposed outcomes:

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

are the right aspirations for the future of family wellbeing. They align directly with Interrelate's continuum of prevention, early intervention, counselling, education, case management and post-separation supports.

Our integrated model already delivers on these outcomes by:

- + Building parenting capacity, confidence and stability through education, counselling and therapeutic supports.
- + Supporting children's emotional literacy, resilience and safety through school programs that reach more than 149,000 students annually.
- + Providing holistic, wrap-around family law and separation services that bring families into broader support pathways, strengthening long-term outcomes.
- + Reducing escalation into crisis systems by intervening early through traumainformed practice.

Whilst we endorse these outcomes, it is essential that the concept of “family” is interpreted broadly, inclusively and in line with contemporary Australian realities. Narrow or traditional definitions risk unintentionally excluding adults, kinship carers, extended family members and significant others who may not have dependent children in their care, yet play critical roles in family functioning, cultural continuity and community wellbeing. Many of these individuals rely on FaC services for support, and it is vital that the redesigned program maintains an expansive, community-informed definition of family to ensure no cohort currently served is left without access to appropriate support.

Poverty, mental health challenges and family violence are key structural drivers of family vulnerability, and the program must explicitly recognise and respond to these intersecting pressures.

A Single National Program

Interrelate agrees that a single national program may create efficiencies and flexibility, especially for organisations delivering multiple program types. However, the benefits will depend on the detail of the design.

We support a single program that:

- + Builds on the demonstrated success and return on investment of current programs, as highlighted through Family Relationship Services Australia’s Centre for International Economics analysis and DSS’s own evaluation findings.
- + Enables flexibility to shift resources across streams in response to local needs.
- + Reduces reporting duplication and allows for more relational engagement with funding managers.
- + Embeds a proportionate universalism approach that reflects how families genuinely present; with needs that are fluid, interconnected and evolving, and that cannot be effectively supported within rigid or narrowly defined service boundaries.

An open competitive tender risks disrupting trusted, long-established community relationships, therefore, tender design must carefully mitigate this risk through valuing continuity, proven performance, community connection and demonstrated outcomes.

The Three Funding Streams

The intent of the three streams is clear. However:

- + Families do not present in neatly differentiated ways, and their needs frequently shift in intensity over time.

- + Rural and regional providers in particular operate as “one-stop” hubs out of necessity, delivering a blend of prevention, early intervention and higherintensity supports within a single service footprint.
- + Many current FaC services already deliver activities that cut across both proposed streams 2 and 3, adjusting the level and type of support in real time based on risk, safety, child developmental needs and family complexity.

While the department has emphasised that services may operate across multiple streams, the requirement for organisations to nominate a single stream in the tender process presents a significant structural disadvantage. Services that currently deliver more than one activity under the FaC program, particularly those operating integrated models across streams 2 and 3 may be unable to fully demonstrate the breadth of outcomes they achieve, the value they bring to communities, or their proven capability to deliver the intentions of the new program. This requirement risks narrowing, rather than enabling, the flexibility and responsiveness the reform aims to promote.

Flexibility must be core to the funding and contracting model. Service delivery must be person-centred and meet clients where they are at. Assessment processes should recognise and value integrated delivery models, not compel providers to artificially reduce or fragment them for tender assessment processes.

Priorities for Investment

Interrelate supports the four proposed investment priorities. We also offer the following recommendations informed by our experience:

Explicitly embed community and culture as core to service design

Children’s wellbeing is inseparable from the social, cultural and relational conditions around them. Community connection, leadership and belonging are proven protective factors. Community must be recognised not simply as a “context” but as a critical component of the model itself.

Strengthen focus on CALD communities, disability, and family violence CALD families and children with disability are significantly under-represented in access to some current programs. The new model must explicitly address these gaps, particularly for families navigating complex systems.

Family violence prevalence and its intersection with child wellbeing warrants stronger visibility across the reform objectives.

Invest in case management and integrated practice

Case management and integrated practice is critical to achieving both outcomes. Case management is the mechanism that holds the service system together: it provides continuity, coordinated pathways, proactive safety planning, and warm, supported referrals. It enables practitioners to build the trusted and sustained

relationships that families rely on through periods of instability and escalation. Without case management, families are left to navigate complex systems alone, and the reform's intentions around early intervention, responsiveness and integrated support cannot be fully realised.

Multi-year, flexible funding

Outcomes in prevention take time. Workforce stability, capability investment and service continuity rely on multi-year agreements with realistic indexation and flexible use of funds over the life of the contract. Interrelate has been fortunate to benefit from five-year funding arrangements in the FaC space, and we know the positive impact this stability has on workforce retention, service quality and community trust. Extending this approach across the new program will be essential to achieving longterm outcomes and enabling providers to plan, innovate and respond meaningfully to emerging local needs.

Improving Outcomes for First Nations Children and Families

Interrelate supports DSS's goal to increase the number of ACCOs delivering services in communities where this is preferred by those communities.

- + Service mapping should identify communities where ACCO-led delivery is appropriate and where mixed models should continue.
- + Non-Indigenous providers must continue to strengthen cultural safety, competency, and access pathways.
- + Partnerships with ACCOs must be staged, supported and culturally respectful not rushed or tokenistic.
- + Client choice is critical; families should be supported to select a culturally appropriate service that best meets their needs.

Interrelate's long-standing partnerships with local Aboriginal organisations place us well to contribute to a stronger, more culturally responsive ecosystem.

Integration and Connection – A Practice, Not a Floorplan

Integration is built through people, trust, shared practice, communication and warm handovers, not simply co-location or structural arrangements.

Effective integration requires:

- + Funded community engagement, coordination and relational work.
- + Shared assessments, common frameworks, and consistent case planning across partners.
- + Trusted relationships developed over time with schools, health services, justice partners, community networks and local leaders.
- + Workforce capability in trauma-informed, culturally responsive and collaborative practice.

Interrelate's integrated holistic service model is an example of coordination that is relational, not structural. It is this practice that enables families to move seamlessly through multiple supports with continuity and safety, delivering on both reform outcomes.

Designing a Fair and Transparent Grant Process

Interrelate strongly supports a tender process that recognises the value of proven performance, deep community connection, and local knowledge. For multiple decades, our services have been trusted by families and communities across NSW, and we know that continuity and demonstrated outcomes matter. To ensure the tender process reflects the realities of service delivery and supports genuine community benefit, we believe it is important that the process:

- + Publishes the weighting for each assessment criterion for transparency and fairness.
- + Appropriately values long-term outcomes, community trust and sustained relationships in each location.
- + Accounts for the higher costs and complexities of delivering services in rural and regional areas.
- + Recognises the importance of a diverse ecosystem of providers; large, medium, small, ACCOs and specialist organisations, each contributing essential strengths to local service systems.
- + Provides clear guidance on how AI will be used in assessment.
- + Releases indicative high-needs areas to allow applicants to respond meaningfully with local insight and context.

A process designed in this way will help safeguard continuity for families, support innovation where it is needed most, and encourage partnerships that strengthen outcomes across communities.

Relational Contracting

Interrelate is strongly supportive of the proposed shift to relational contracting. It offers an opportunity to restore the collaborative, trust-based partnership that historically characterised government–sector relationships before the shift to more transactional grants administration.

Relational contracting should:

- + Empower funding agreement managers with greater delegation, capability and stability.
- + Support ongoing learning, not compliance-heavy reporting.
- + Enable flexibility within contracts to respond to emerging needs.
- + Include staged implementation to avoid disruption.

- + Recognise the inherent power imbalance and ensure safeguards to protect service providers.

Relational contracting has the potential to significantly strengthen innovation, responsiveness and community impact when supported by clear expectations, capable funding agreement managers and appropriate delegation. Without these foundations, the approach could inadvertently introduce additional administrative burden and increase uncertainty.

Interrelate is interested in participating in a relational contracting approach, provided it is implemented in a way that genuinely supports flexibility, partnership and stability for families and communities.

Data, Outcomes and Continuous Improvement

Interrelate supports a balanced outcomes measurement approach that includes:

- + Quantitative indicators through DEX.
- + Qualitative measures of wellbeing, family functioning, resilience and safety.
- + Longitudinal indicators that reflect the true timeframe in which prevention outcomes emerge.
- + Guidance for high-quality case studies that show complexity, relational practice, cultural responsiveness and system navigation.

Data must not only demonstrate performance; it should also drive learning and continuous improvement. This can be achieved by DSS sharing data back with service providers in a timely and accessible way, enabling deeper insights into outcomes and areas for enhancement.

Final Comments

Interrelate strongly endorses the intent of this reform. The proposed direction reflects many of the principles that guide our own approach: early intervention, integrated practice, relational work, cultural safety, community connection and child wellbeing.

We encourage the Department to:

- + Build on the strong outcomes already achieved across the sector and preserve the evidence-based foundations of the current programs.
- + Protect trusted, community-embedded providers whose longstanding relationships ensure stability, safety and continuity for families.
- + Design genuine flexibility into the program so services can respond to emerging need, local context and family complexity.
- + Recognise and fund the relational work that enables meaningful collaboration, integration and coordinated support.

- + Embed cultural, community-led and trauma-informed practice at the heart of the new program.
- + Introduce relational contracting with clear expectations, capability and transparency to ensure it delivers on its promise of partnership and innovation.

Interrelate stands ready to work in partnership with DSS and the sector to bring this vision to life for children, families and communities across Australia.