



Save the Children

54 reasons

SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

FROM RECOGNITION TO ACTION:

Delivering for children and young people
through the Second Action Plan to End
Violence against Women and Children

JULY 2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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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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Project team

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54 Reasons Research Partnership

This consultation project is part of a research partnership with 54 Reasons.

An earlier study involved in-depth interviews with 17 child victim-survivors aged 10-17 years old in Queensland, Western Australia and Victoria to better understand their experiences of crisis responses to domestic and family violence, including what they identified as required in policy and practice to better support child victims' safety and wellbeing needs. The findings from that research are presented in a stand-alone report, *Trust, Stability and Safety* (2026).

The experiences and insights shared by those 17 child victim-survivors through that study have informed the analysis in this consultation. We are very grateful to them for sharing their experience and insights to contribute to improving policy and practice to better address and respond to child victimisation in Australia.

To complement this submission, a youth friendly summary of the Consultation Findings is in development.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2022, Australia's National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 marked an important turning point in national policy by recognising for the first time children and young people as victim-survivors of violence and abuse in their own right. This shift represented far more than a change in language. It acknowledged that children experience violence directly, have their own rights, needs and experiences of harm, and require responses that centre them.

That recognition has been widely welcomed and reflects progress. It has strengthened policy conversations, informed research and begun to reshape practice. Yet recognition alone does not improve children's safety and wellbeing. Four years on, there remains a significant gap between recognising children and young people as victim-survivors and consistently responding to them as such through policy, legislation, funding, service design and system reform.

We have a clear understanding of the scale of child victimisation across Australia. The 2023 Australian Child Maltreatment Study found that child maltreatment is "endemic" with nearly one in three Australian children experiencing physical abuse, 28 per cent sexual abuse, over 30 per cent emotional abuse and nearly 2 in 5 Australian children growing up in a household where there is domestic and family violence.

With the scale of the challenge front of mind, the development of the Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children presents a critical opportunity to close the gap between recognition and action. It provides Federal, State and Territory governments with the opportunity to embed children and young people's experiences, rights and needs across prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing. And let us be clear – funded efforts to better address violence and abuse experienced by children and young people should not come at a cost to ongoing efforts to end domestic, family and sexual violence experienced by adult victim-survivors, including women who are disproportionately impacted by men's intimate partner violence.

This consultation report presents the findings of a rapid national consultation project commissioned by 54 Reasons to inform the development of the Second Action Plan.

Throughout interviews, focus groups and an online survey, the consultation engaged more than 200 stakeholders from across Australia, including Children's Commissioners, academics, frontline practitioners, policy experts, sector leaders and youth advocates. It also draws upon a rapid review of previous inquiries, inquests and government reviews to identify areas of longstanding consensus, unimplemented recommendations and actionable opportunities for reform. This report also includes the voices of young victim-survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence. While this consultation engaged adult stakeholders, the decision to incorporate these lived experience narratives reflects a commitment to maximising the value of the contributions already made by children and young people who have generously shared their experiences through previous research (see pages 23-4).

What we know from child victim-survivors

Across Australia, children and young people with lived experience of domestic, family and sexual violence have consistently told us what they need to be safe, to recover and to heal. Through previous research with child victim-survivors and the work of 54 Reasons, a remarkably consistent message emerges. While adults often focus on systems, structures and policy reform, children and young people are hyper practical.

They want trusted adults who notice when something is wrong, who believe them, know how to have difficult conversations, follow through on what they promise and take their experiences seriously.

They want services that are easy to find, simple to access and designed around their needs rather than those of adults. They want barriers removed so they can seek help safely, and they want to be involved in decisions that affect their lives. These are not complex requests. Yet delivering them consistently requires systems that are intentionally designed around children's rights, developmental needs and lived realities.

Young people have also consistently described the growing importance of digital spaces in their lives. For many young people, online spaces are the first place they look to understand what they are experiencing, to learn whether what is happening to them is abuse, and to access information about where they can seek help. Digital spaces are increasingly central to the way that young victim-survivors describe their help-seeking journeys, yet our responses have not kept pace.

Children and young people have told us what they need. The challenge is not understanding their priorities, it is building systems and services capable of delivering them. The recommended actions in this Consultation Report create those conditions: systems that listen, respond earlier, remove barriers to support, strengthen trusted relationships, and place children's rights, safety and wellbeing at the centre of Australia's response to violence and abuse.

“My whole childhood was taken from me.

I didn't have a childhood.

That's why I hope my voice can change it one day.”

(Ivy, 16-year-old female, First Nations, experienced violence from age three, StudyA)

What we heard from stakeholders

Across the consultation there was broad agreement that Australia has built a domestic, family and sexual violence system that continues to centre adults, while children frequently remain peripheral to policy design, funding decisions and service delivery. Although governments increasingly acknowledge children as victim-survivors, stakeholders consistently described responses that have been "bolted onto" adult service systems rather than intentionally designed around children's developmental needs, rights and experiences.

This has profound consequences. Children continue to experience barriers accessing specialist support, therapeutic services, safe housing, education and long-term recovery supports. Many continue to encounter child protection, family law and youth justice systems that fail to recognise the impacts of trauma or meet their needs and, in some instances, create further harm. Where they do proactively seek help, too often the systems that children and young people encounter are fragmented, difficult to navigate, under resourced, designed primarily around adult victim-survivors, and unable to identify risks and respond to children's needs in their own right.

The consultation highlighted that meaningful reform requires more than expanding existing services. It requires transformative commitments - to redesign systems so that children and young people are consistently recognised as rights holders whose safety, participation and recovery are central to the policies, investments and services that purport to meet their needs.

Stakeholders were of the shared view that Australia does not lack evidence about what is needed to better address violence and abuse experienced by children and young people. Royal Commissions,

Parliamentary Inquiries, Death Review processes, Coronial Inquests, national research and lived experience have repeatedly identified many of the same priorities. The challenge is no longer identifying solutions, it is committing to action and implementation.

This Consultation Report identifies a range of actions that can be implemented now. Throughout the consultation, stakeholders discussed the rich diversity that exists among children and young people including related to culture, geographic location, sexuality, disability and developmental stage. Inevitably, given the purpose of this consultation, the actions identified sit at a level of aggregation that does not sufficiently acknowledge nor do justice to this diversity. The actions identified are “system-wide” with the need to tailor responses as part of detailed design, implementation and delivery. We have not sought to complete that work through this consultation project. However, neither do we underestimate the importance of reflecting the diversity that exists among children and young people as part of efforts to meaningfully address and more effectively prevent their experiences of all forms of domestic, family and sexual violence.

In this Executive Summary, we outline the actions which received the highest support among stakeholders in this consultation. In addition, within the body of the report, additional actions which received broad based support are also included. Taken together, our message to governments is clear – act on the solutions identified in this and so many prior reports.

Prevention

Australia has not made significant progress in preventing violence against children. Stakeholders argued that, despite growing recognition of the importance of primary prevention in ending violence against women, comparatively little attention has been directed towards an explicit focus on preventing violence against children.

The recommended actions reflect the areas where stakeholders believed national leadership could have the greatest preventative impact. Collectively, these actions seek to strengthen Australia's prevention architecture by embedding children's rights within policy and legislation, investing in evidence-based primary prevention, and creating the conditions in which all children and young people can grow up free from violence.

Three recommended actions:

- 1. The Australian Government, in partnership with state and territory governments, should lead the development of Australia's first National Framework for the Primary Prevention of Violence against Children.** The Framework should be developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, children and young people, researchers and the community sector. The Framework should be reviewed every five years to ensure it remains responsive to emerging evidence and children's changing experiences of violence. Alongside the framework, a national organisation should be adequately resourced with responsibility for driving implementation of the framework into cross-sector practice.
- 2. Update and strengthen the implementation of Respectful Relationships Education to better reflect children and young people's contemporary experiences and improve early identification, help-seeking and support for young victim-survivors.** Effective implementation of the revised RRE curriculum will require investment in teacher training including related to responding to disclosures, high-quality resources, school leadership, co-design processes with young people and clear referral pathways to specialist support services when children disclose experiences of violence or abuse. There should also be a review of the policy cycle associated with updating the curriculum to avoid ongoing challenges related to the curriculum failing to reflect contemporary challenges in young people's lives.

3. **Repeal legislative defences to corporal punishment in every Australian jurisdiction, alongside a national awareness campaign and increased investment in evidence-based parenting support programs.** The Australian Government should work with states and territories to achieve nationally consistent repeal of legislative defences that permit the use of physical punishment against children. This reform should be accompanied by:
 - a national public education campaign communicating children's right to live free from violence and support children to understand that physical punishment is not an acceptable form of discipline;
 - evidence-based parenting education and support programs delivered across key developmental stages;
 - culturally safe resources developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and other priority populations;
 - ongoing monitoring of community attitudes and awareness following legislative reform.

Early Intervention

There was shared recognition across the consultations that the system response to children and young people is heavily oriented to crisis, and that children and young people should not have to wait until violence escalates to serious harm before receiving support. There was shared acknowledgement that effective early intervention has the potential not only to improve immediate safety, but also to reduce lifelong harms, interrupt cycles of violence and improve children's long-term wellbeing. Stakeholders consistently reflected on the need for earlier identification of children experiencing violence through universal services, including schools, early childhood education, health services and primary care. They emphasised the need for earlier therapeutic intervention, improved responses to adolescents using violence, and greater investment in workforce capability to recognise and respond to children's help-seeking and their experiences of violence and abuse.

Three recommended actions:

1. **The Federal Government, in collaboration with states and territories, should lead a review and reform of parental consent laws to reduce barriers to children and young people accessing help.** The review should focus on laws that reduce opportunities to seek help and access services among children and young people that have experienced violence and abuse, and identifying application of parent consent laws that are not aligned with child rights, including the best interests of children and young people. As part of any law reform effort in this space, particular focus should be placed on building the capacity of the workforce to understand how laws related to parental consent should be embedded in practice including where safety should be prioritised and where the consent-giving rights of someone using violence and abuse can be excluded.
2. **The Federal Government, in collaboration with states and territories, lead a review of mandatory reporting laws. The focus should be on balancing child safety with legislation that does not deter help seeking and early intervention.** As part of law reform, noting the possibility that disclosures are likely to increase, particular focus should be placed on investment and building awareness of non-statutory responses that can be provided following disclosure which are orientated towards meeting the needs of children and their families (as against an orientation toward managing risk).
3. **The Federal Government increase investment in non-statutory programs which reflects an understanding of and seeks to address experiences of victimisation among boys.** This could include:
 - drop-in centres that are accessible and engaging where young people can build trusted relationships with adults who are equipped to meet their needs.

- programs that build practical skills among adolescents that may be adversely impacted by their own victimisation which includes work in schools and other community settings as well as engaging young people's families as part of strengthening relationships skills.
- engaging at-risk fathers (including those who have been victims of violence as children) during pregnancy and following birth of their first child.

Response

Children and young people who experience violence and abuse should have access to specialist responses designed specifically to identify their risks and support their distinct needs. There was strong consensus on the need for dedicated specialist domestic, family and sexual violence services for children and young people in every Australian jurisdiction. Stakeholders consistently described significant gaps in the current service system, with many children unable to access age-appropriate therapeutic support, child-centred services and coordinated responses following a disclosure of victimisation. Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of strengthening children's safety within family law, child protection and youth justice systems, improving access to education and housing during periods of crisis, and ensuring that responses recognise the diversity of children's experiences across different communities and life circumstances.

Three recommended actions:

- 1. Develop and deliver specialist response services for children and young people who experience violence and abuse in every state and territory.** The Australian Government should work with states and territories to establish and sustainably fund specialist services for children and young people who experience violence and abuse in every jurisdiction ensuring access in regional and rural areas. These services should provide developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed responses for children and young people, including specialist therapeutic responses for children and young people who are using, or at risk of using violence. Services should support safety, recovery and healing through multidisciplinary child centred care, coordinated referral pathways, family-centred practice where appropriate, and where needed, access to developmentally appropriate harmful sexual behaviour interventions.
- 2. Equip non-specialist workforces with the ability to respond to disclosures of child victimisation.** The Australian Government should work with states and territories to strengthen workforce capability across the education, health, early childhood, justice and community service sectors, ensuring professionals who work with children and families are equipped to identify victimisation, respond safely to disclosures, undertake trauma-informed communication, understand child development, assess immediate safety, and facilitate timely referral to specialist support. As part of this, the Australian Government should work with universities and relevant professional accreditation bodies to embed minimum domestic, family and sexual violence competencies (including recognising indicators of child victimisation, trauma-informed responses to disclosure, child development, coercive control, risk assessment, cultural safety, referral pathways and mandatory reporting responsibilities) within the accreditation standards for professions working with children and families, including teaching, medicine, nursing, midwifery, law, psychology, social work and youth work. Governments should also support ongoing professional development, supervision and reflective practice to ensure capability is maintained throughout professionals' careers.
- 3. Fund services for children and young people commensurate with the scale of the challenge.** The Australian Government should work with states and territories to substantially increase investment in specialist services for children and young people experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence, ensuring funding is commensurate with the prevalence and complexity of children's victimisation. This investment should support timely access to specialist

therapeutic services, advocacy, recovery supports and integrated responses that recognise children as victim-survivors in their own right. Funding should also prioritise equitable access to services across Australia, including for children and young people living in rural, regional and remote communities, and ensure services are culturally safe, disability inclusive and responsive to the diverse experiences and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, refugee and migrant children and young people, LGBTIQ+ children and young people, and other priority cohorts.

Recovery and Healing

Children and young people who experience violence and abuse often require sustained therapeutic, educational, social and practical supports over many years. Stakeholders reflected that recovery systems should align with children's developmental needs and recognise that healing is a long-term and non-linear process. Across the consultation, stakeholders reflected on the limited attention on healing and recovery as part of efforts to prevent and respond to family, domestic and sexual violence, with the exception of healing-based programs and initiatives that have been led within First Nations communities. Where there are recovery focused programs or supports, stakeholders noted they were varied in design, availability and accessibility across jurisdictions and that there are particularly significant challenges facing children and young people in rural and regional areas with regards to accessing the support they need.

Three recommended actions:

- 1. The Federal Government, working with states and territories, should implement a mental health and wellbeing guarantee ensuring children and young people who have experienced violence or abuse have access to long-term therapeutic, mental health and wellbeing supports that meet their needs.** Supports provided and the associated funding should better reflect the realities of recovery and healing for children and young people – long-term, non-linear, uncertain, multi-faceted and requiring specialist skill sets. Consideration should be given to streamlining eligibility criteria to minimise impacts of the trauma “narrative burden”. With regards to funding quantum for the guarantee, government should be informed by potential savings of effective recovery and healing due to decreased intergenerational violence.
- 2. The Federal Government, working with states and territories, should develop nationally consistent recovery pathways for young people currently in and during transition from the out-of-home care system.** The Commonwealth Government has already established National Standards for out-of-home care which were developed in 2011. With this aspiration in mind, and to reflect evidence that has emerged over the last 15 years, the Federal Government should place an explicit focus on improving life outcomes and continuity of care for children and young people in the out of home care system. Funding mechanisms such as the recently established Commonwealth Outcomes Fund provide a potential avenue to engage with states and territories as part of this effort, together with policy and funding levers that are under the Federal Government's direct control.
- 3. The Federal Government should expand access to safe, stable housing and integrated wrap-around supports, including Youth Foyers, transitional housing and specialist accommodation.** The federal government could draw on policy and funding levers under their direct control including housing construction, Medicare, expanding eligibility for the leaving violence payments to young people, and tailored legal as well as financial counselling for young people. The focus of these efforts should particularly be placed on meeting the needs of unaccompanied children and young people escaping family, domestic or sexual violence.

Governance and Accountability

Meaningful reform will require sustained national leadership, robust governance and strong accountability mechanisms. Responsibility for responding to children's experiences of violence and abuse currently sits across multiple government portfolios and jurisdictions. This contributes to fragmentation and a lack of accountability for actions, funding and outcomes. This consultation report recommends three actions that would ensure that commitments made under the Second Action Plan are accompanied by clear responsibility, measurable outcomes and transparent reporting.

Three recommended actions:

- 1. Re-establish a Federal Minister for Children.** The Australian Government should re-establish a dedicated Federal Minister for Children with Cabinet-level responsibility for advancing children's rights, safety and wellbeing and providing national leadership on issues affecting children and young people. The Minister should oversee Australia's implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, coordinate cross-portfolio action across the Commonwealth, champion children's participation in national decision-making, and ensure children's rights and interests are consistently embedded across legislation, policy, funding and service delivery. The Minister should also be responsible for monitoring progress against national commitments affecting children and young people, including the implementation of the Second Action Plan, and overseeing a dedicated stream of funding specific to government efforts to address violence and abuse experienced by children and young people.
- 2. Embed Closing the Gap commitments across the implementation of the Second Action Plans.** The Commonwealth should ensure that implementation of the Second Action Plans is aligned with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap by embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination across all actions affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. This should include sustained investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led initiatives and meaningful partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations, children and young people to design, deliver and evaluate prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing efforts.
- 3. Strengthen integration across national plans and strategies relating to child victimisation as well as children and young people at risk of causing harm.** The Australian Government should strengthen integration across the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children, the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse, Safe and Supported, and other relevant national policy frameworks to ensure a more coordinated response to children and young people affected by violence and abuse. This could include:
 - Developing a nationally agreed child outcomes measurement framework to monitor children's safety, wellbeing, recovery and long-term life outcomes across government efforts,
 - Clarifying responsibilities and accountabilities for overlapping forms of violence and abuse, including peer to peer sexual violence.

Noting the increasing understanding of the links between victimisation and (while not deterministic) those who cause harm, integration should also include actions that address the use of violence among young people taking an inter-generational approach to domestic, family and sexual violence.

Embedding children's rights

A consistent message throughout the consultations was that there is an opportunity to more clearly embed a commitment to upholding children's rights within the Second Action Plan. Actions taken under the Second Action Plan should be guided by Australia's obligations as a signatory to the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, recognising children and young people as rights holders with the right to protection from violence, participation in decisions affecting them, and access to services that support their safety, recovery and development.

Stakeholders recommended embedding children's rights more consistently across domestic legislation, policy development, funding decisions and service design. They also called for stronger mechanisms to support meaningful participation of children and young people in national policy development, alongside appropriate safeguards to ensure participation is ethical, safe and adequately supported. In line with this, in addition to this Consultation Report, we have developed a youth friendly summary of the Consultation Findings.

Five recommended actions:

- 1. Incorporate the Convention on the Rights of the Child into Australian domestic law.** The Commonwealth should work with states and territories to progressively incorporate the rights contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Australian domestic law, ensuring that all legislation, policies and government decision-making affecting children are demonstrably compatible with Australia's obligations under the Convention.
- 2. Recommended Action: Use Commonwealth funding agreements to strengthen accountability for children's rights.** The Australian Government should attach child-rights conditions to relevant Federal Government agreements and relevant funding agreements with states and territories, including funding for legal assistance, policing, health, housing, education, disability services, and justice reinvestment. Under this approach, state and territory jurisdictions could be required to demonstrate compliance with children's rights obligations to receive funding under the relevant agreement, including to demonstrate that commissioned services within their jurisdictions are also complying with the relevant children's rights obligations.
- 3. Develop National Guidelines for the Safe and Meaningful Participation of Children and Young People in Policy, Advocacy and Service Design.** The Australian Government should develop, in partnership with children and young people, nationally consistent guidelines that establish minimum standards for the safe, ethical and meaningful participation of children and young people who have experienced violence and abuse in policy development, advocacy and service design. The guidelines should be accompanied by implementation support, workforce training and practical resources to assist governments and relevant organisations to embed child-safe participation practices.
- 4. Establish child and young person representation within the governance arrangements for the Second Action Plan.** The Australian Government should embed a child participation principle within the governance arrangements for the Second Action Plan by ensuring that children and young people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, are meaningfully represented in implementation, oversight and review mechanisms. These governance arrangements should provide genuine opportunities for children and young people to inform priorities, monitor progress, contribute to decision-making and assess whether governments are delivering on their commitments. To facilitate transparent accountability, government should publicly report on how children and young people's views have been taken into account in the relevant decisions under the Second Action Plan.
- 5. Develop a youth-friendly version of the Second Action Plan.** The Australian Government should develop and publish a youth-friendly version of the Second Action Plans under both the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children and the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse. These documents should be co-designed with children and young people and presented in accessible, age-appropriate language and formats. The youth-friendly Action Plans should clearly explain the commitments

governments have made, how children and young people's views informed the plans, how progress will be monitored and how children and young people can provide feedback on the implementation of the Second Action Plans to facilitate their ongoing participation in government's efforts to better address child victimisation.

From recognition to action

The Second Action Plan presents a timely opportunity to move beyond recognising children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right and to build systems that consistently prevent violence, intervene earlier, provide specialist child-centred responses and support long-term recovery and healing. Achieving this vision will require sustained national leadership, long-term investment and meaningful accountability.

This consultation demonstrated substantial consensus across researchers, practitioners, Children's Commissioners, policy experts, researchers, youth advocates and frontline practitioners, about what actions are needed to better address children's experiences of violence and abuse. These actions can be implemented by governments now.

Australia does not face an evidence gap. Nor does it lack recommendations. The recommended actions contained in this report build on decades of research, Royal Commissions, Parliamentary Inquiries, Coronial Inquests, Death Review processes and the lived experience of child victim-survivors. They reflect solutions that are well understood and broadly supported across the sector. The question facing governments is no longer what is needed to better address child victimisation in this country. The evidence is clear, and the actions have been articulated. The question now is whether Australia federal, state and territory governments have the political will to act.

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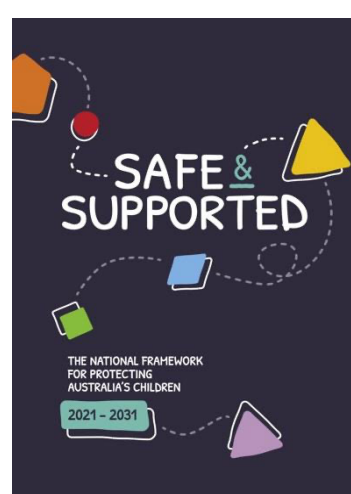
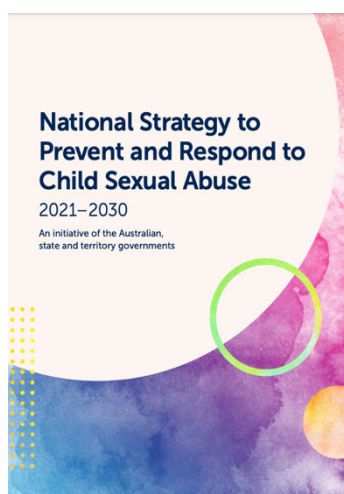
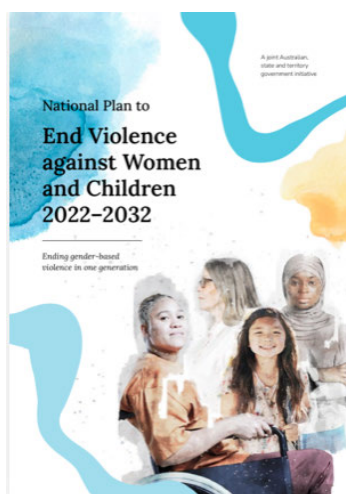
INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 (Department of Social Services, DSS, 2022) embedded for the first time in national policy an acknowledgement of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right. The inclusion represented a clear shift from the plan's predecessor which referred to 'violence against women and their children', reinforcing a long-held view in policy and practice that children were seen and responded to as an extension of their protective parent, most often their mum.

For decades, this focus on the protective parent contributed to the invisibility of child victims, and a failure of system responses to attend to their unique safety, support and recovery needs. As such, the 2022 National Plan launch and acknowledgement of children and young people *in their own right* was deservedly lauded as an important step forward in government policy (see, among others, Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission, 2025; Gillfeather-Spetere & Watson, 2024; Meyer & Fitz-Gibbon, 2022).

In the intervening four years that acknowledgement has been repeated frequently by federal, state and territory leaders, and in subsequent domestic, family and sexual violence policies and frameworks. Increasingly though questions have been raised as to the extent to which that acknowledgement has been reflected in government actions and allocations of funding, and critically, the degree to which it has translated into improved interventions, services and outcomes for children and young people who experience violence and abuse.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this report is to inform consultations currently being undertaken to develop the Second Action Plan under the National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 (DSS, 2022). Based on a rapid consultation with over 200 stakeholders across Australia, including Commissioners, sector leaders, youth advocates, frontline practitioners and academics, we have sought to identify where there is broad based support for specific actions related to children and young people under each of the four pillars of the National Plan: prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing. While not the primary purpose of this report, findings are also relevant to the Second Action Plan under the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030 (National Office for Child Safety, 2021a) as well as the focus and objectives of Safe & Supported, the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031 (DSS, 2021).



The introduction to this report outlines the scale of the problem of violence against children in Australia and the impacts of experiences of violence and abuse on children and young people. We then outline how we have approached this consultation which has included a rapid evidence review,

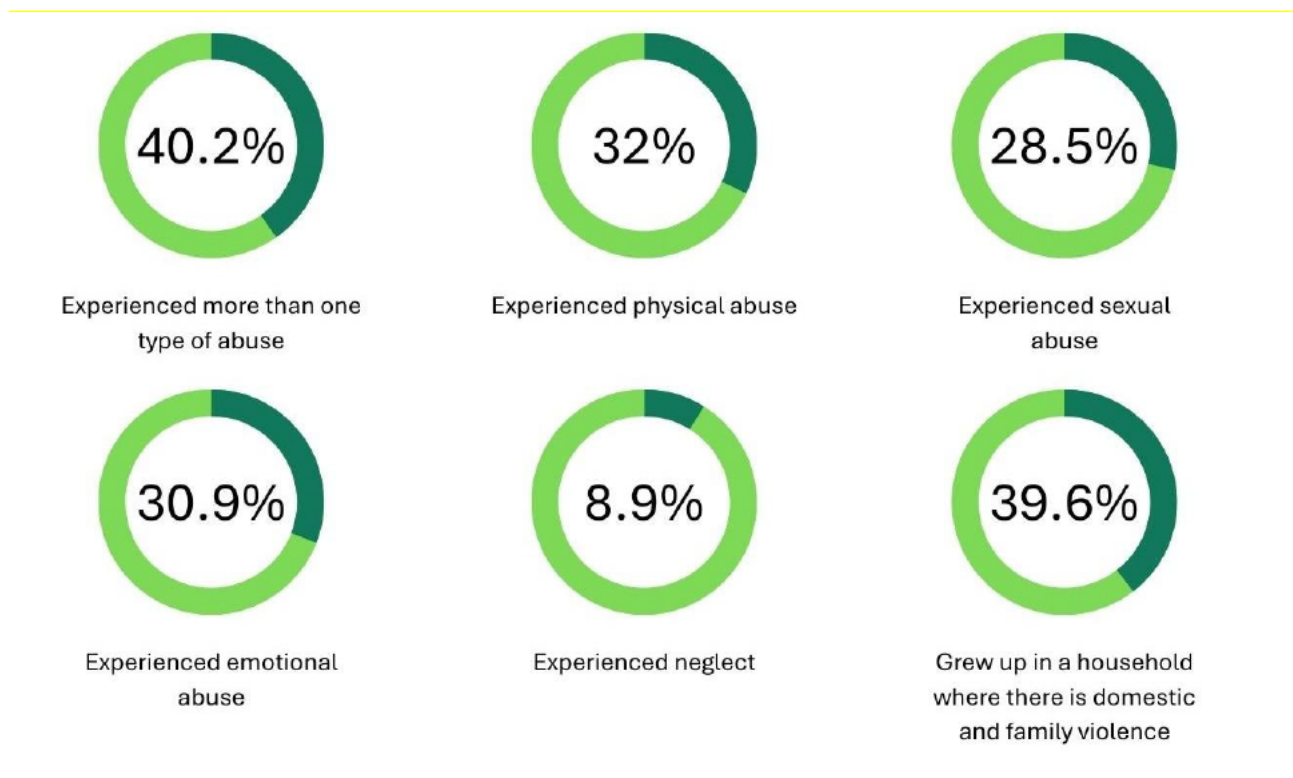
interviews, focus groups and an online survey. Drawing on what we heard across the consultations, findings from the consultation are presented throughout this report in four main sections:

1. Recognising progress which has been made,
2. Identifying overarching gaps and challenges,
3. Recommended actions under each pillar of the National Plan, and
4. What is needed to improve governance and better uphold children's rights.

Ultimately, we conclude with a call for political action informed by stakeholder reflections on the reality that there is a need for greater political will to take action which meets the needs of children and young people who have experienced violence or abuse.

Recognising the scale of the problem

The understanding of the prevalence of children's experiences of violence and abuse in Australia has evolved substantially in recent years. The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (Mathews et al., 2023) found that child maltreatment is 'endemic' in Australia. The study findings show, among Australians aged 16 years and over, the prevalence of child maltreatment is:



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people experience disproportionate rates of all forms of child abuse and violence, including physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and experiences of domestic and family violence (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014; SNAICC et al., 2017). This overrepresentation reflects the enduring impacts of colonisation, intergenerational trauma and the ongoing failure of systems to provide culturally safe, accessible and preventative supports. These harms are often compounded by the intervention of statutory systems, with Aboriginal children overrepresented in child protection and youth justice responses (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014, 2024; Legal and Constitutional Affairs Reference Committee, 2025).

The lifelong impacts of these experiences of abuse and violence among Australian children are profound, often cumulative and interlinked. The Australian Child Maltreatment study found that mental health disorders are significantly more likely to occur among Australians who have

experienced a form of child maltreatment (Scott et al., 2023), and that specifically, young people aged 16-24 years old who experienced abuse are 2.9 times more likely to have any mental health disorder compared to those who did not experience abuse (Mathews et al., 2023, see also Blake et al., 2025; Clarke et al., 2020). This is consistent with international and national research that has examined the (often hidden) role of domestic and family violence victimisation in young people's deaths by suicide (Meyer, Atienzar-Prieto, Fitz-Gibbon, & Moore, 2023).

Beyond mental health impacts, research has found that experiences of violence or abuse during childhood impacts on young victim-survivors engagement in education and their school performance, disconnection from peers, social and other community networks, housing instability, financial insecurity, and increased risk of future domestic, family and sexual violence victimisation and/or use of harmful and risky behaviours such as substance use and addiction (see, among others, Bender et al., 2022; Campo, Kaspiw & Tayton, 2014; Fitz-Gibbon, 2025a; Fitz-Gibbon & Meyer, 2023; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022, 2023b; Haslam et al., 2023; Stewart, Roberts & Fitz-Gibbon, 2025). Within this, research has found that First Nations children, children with disabilities, and children from culturally diverse backgrounds are disproportionately affected by victimisation and the impacts of violence and abuse, highlighting the need for intersectional and inclusive policy responses.

Research has also found that childhood experiences of violence and associated trauma, where left untreated, increase the risk of future perpetration and victimisation (Salter et al., 2023; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022). For example, a 2022 ANROWS study found that the vast majority of young people who self-reported using adolescent violence in the home also reported previous experiences of child abuse, with 89 per cent reporting some form of victimisation (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022a, 2022b). This study found that young people who had experienced both child abuse and had grown up in homes where there was family violence were 9.2 times more likely to use violence in the home compared to those who had not (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022). Australia's first child sexual abuse perpetration study found adult men with sexual thoughts towards children who reported offending against a child were six times more likely to report being sexual abused as a child (Salter et al., 2023). Among young people, a systematic review examining pathways to harmful sexual behaviours found the pathways with the strongest evidence base were child sexual abuse victimisation, experience of physical and emotional abuse, living with domestic and family violence, and disrupted attachments (McKibbin et al., 2023).

The implementation gap

Successive reviews and inquiries over the last decade at the federal, state and territory levels, including Parliamentary Inquiries, Royal Commissions, Death Review Inquiries and Coronial Inquests, have consistently documented system shortcomings related to children and young people who have experienced violence. There have been repeated calls across these inquiries for the improved recognition of children as victim-survivors in their own right to be translated into clear policy and practices actions, including through the development and delivery of dedicated child-specific responses, child-focused risk assessment and management practice, information sharing practices, and a range of dedicated services and programs to better meet the early intervention, crisis and longer-term healing and recovery needs of young victim-survivors of all forms of domestic, family and sexual violence.

And yet, while the release of Inquiry reports and Inquest findings is often accompanied by political public commentary to act with urgency, progress has been frustratingly slow and all too often recommendations made have remained unimplemented years later.

A review by the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Australian Human Rights Commission (Stevens & Gahan, 2024) examined 61 reports related to the child protection and youth justice systems published between 2010 and 2022. Systemic issues were repeatedly identified across these reports with the authors recommending "stronger governance and accountability in monitoring the implementation of previous recommendations". At the time of publication, the then National

Children's Commissioner Anne Hollonds commented "The fact that the same evidence-based recommendations are repeated in reports, year after year, demonstrates the lack of accountability for action and the lack of a sense of urgency".

The Second Action Plan presents an opportunity to break this cycle of implementation shortfalls and to meaningfully act on the government's commitment to respond to children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right. The broadly supported actions contained throughout this report build on those that governments have received in recent years from other inquiries, reviews and inquests – they are evidence based, broadly supported by the sector and critically, they present a timely opportunity to federal, state and territory governments to move from rhetoric to action. They should be embedded within the Second Action Plan alongside clear measurable commitments, sustained funding and accountability for action.

APPROACH TO THE CONSULTATION

This rapid consultation project was carried out in July 2026 across three key stages:

- 1) a rapid evidence and policy review,
- 2) national stakeholder consultations through interviews and focus groups, and
- 3) a national online survey.¹

This staged approach enabled existing evidence to be considered alongside contemporary stakeholder perspectives, while providing opportunities to test and refine emerging recommendations before finalisation. Stakeholder engagement was intentionally designed to include organisations and individuals representing diverse sectors and communities, recognising that children's experiences of violence and access to support are shaped by intersecting identities and circumstances. Where possible, this included engagement with organisations representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, LGBTIQA+ children and young people, children and young people with disability, and rural, regional and remote communities.

Details on each stage of the consultation project are set out in the following sections.

Rapid evidence and policy review

This work commenced with a rapid review of recent Australian evidence, policy and practice relating to children and young people who experience, or are at risk of using, domestic, family and sexual violence. The review drew on findings and recommendations from Royal Commissions, Parliamentary Inquiries, Death Review Inquiries and Coronial Inquests, government reviews, national strategies, academic literature and key sector reports published over the last decade. The purpose of the review was to identify areas of recurring consensus, recommendations that have been previously made and remain relevant, implementation gaps and ongoing opportunities for reform.

Findings from the rapid evidence and policy review informed the development of the interview and focus group discussion guide, together with the online stakeholder survey. Rather than asking participants to begin with a blank slate, the consultation tested stakeholder support for actions that had already been identified through previous inquiries, reviews and research, while also providing opportunities for participants to identify additional priorities, emerging issues and gaps in existing recommendations. This approach ensured the consultation built on the substantial body of existing evidence and focused stakeholder discussion on identifying the highest priority and most achievable actions for inclusion in the Second Action Plan.

Interviews and focus groups

For this consultation project, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were undertaken with stakeholders from across Australia. Participants were purposively recruited based on their expertise in policy, research, service delivery, advocacy and lived experience leadership relating to children and young people affected by domestic, family and sexual violence. Stakeholders were identified collaboratively by the project team and 54 Reasons to ensure representation across the breadth of the sector and to prioritise organisations with expertise relevant to the development of the Second Action Plan.

These consultations included:

¹ Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee, Study no. 2026-06-1006.

- 26 interviews with 33 people including current and former Children's Commissioners, key sector leaders, researchers and policy experts.
- 10 focus groups with 74 people involving organisations and individuals working across child and family services, domestic, family and sexual violence, child protection, prevention and early intervention, justice, education, homelessness, academia and specialist services supporting priority cohorts of children and young people.
- Two additional focus groups were undertaken with eight youth advocates aged 18 years and over, including young people with lived expertise of domestic, family and sexual violence, to ensure that their perspectives directly informed the consultation findings and emerging recommendations. Youth advocates were invited to participate in the consultation project via established youth advocacy groups and organisations currently engaging with youth advocates.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted online² using a semi-structured discussion guide informed by findings from the rapid evidence and policy review. Discussions explored strengths and gaps across the pillars of prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing as well as identified actions needed, priority policy and investment opportunities; barriers to implementation; and opportunities to strengthen child-centred approaches and governance.

Online survey

A national online survey was conducted concurrently with the interviews and focus groups using the Qualtrics platform. The survey complemented the qualitative consultation by enabling a broader range of stakeholders to contribute to the project, including individuals and organisations who were unable to participate in interviews or focus groups.

The survey drew directly on findings from the rapid evidence and policy review and sought stakeholder feedback on potential actions drawn from the rapid evidence and policy review across each of the four pillars of the National Plan: Prevention, Early Intervention, Response, and Recovery and Healing. Participants were asked to rank proposed actions, identify additional actions needed, explain the rationale for their highest priorities, and provide broader reflections on future policy directions. The survey incorporated both structured and open-ended questions to capture quantitative indicators of stakeholder priorities together with qualitative insights to inform the refinement of the final recommendations.

The survey was open to stakeholders aged 18 years and over with relevant professional, policy, research or advocacy expertise and experience relating to addressing domestic, family and sexual violence experienced by children and young people. The survey was distributed via email through participating organisations, existing professional networks and sector leaders, with respondents encouraged to share the survey within their professional networks using a snowball sampling approach. The survey opened on July 17 and closed on July 27.

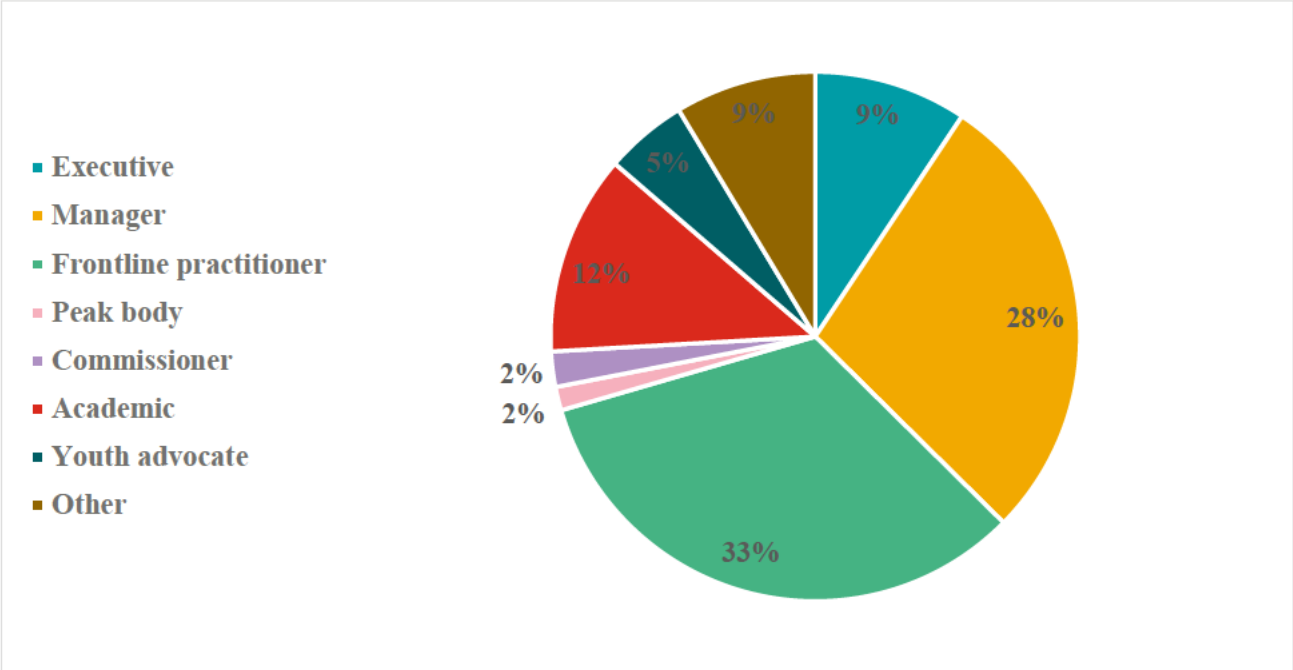
119 individuals completed the survey. There were a small number of individuals who participated in an interview (n=6) or a focus group (n=9) and also completed the survey. The majority of survey respondents only participated in this phase of the consultation project (87 per cent, n=104).

The majority of survey respondents worked most closely in the area of family domestic and sexual violence (45 per cent, n=54) and children, youth and families (40 per cent, n=48), although there were also surveys completed by stakeholders working in schools and education settings (5 per cent, n=6), justice (4 per cent, n=5) and other community or social services (1 per cent, n=1). There were five survey respondents that indicated they worked in another field not listed in the survey. Within this,

² With the exception of one individual interview which was conducted in person. This was nominated as preferred for the stakeholder interviewed.

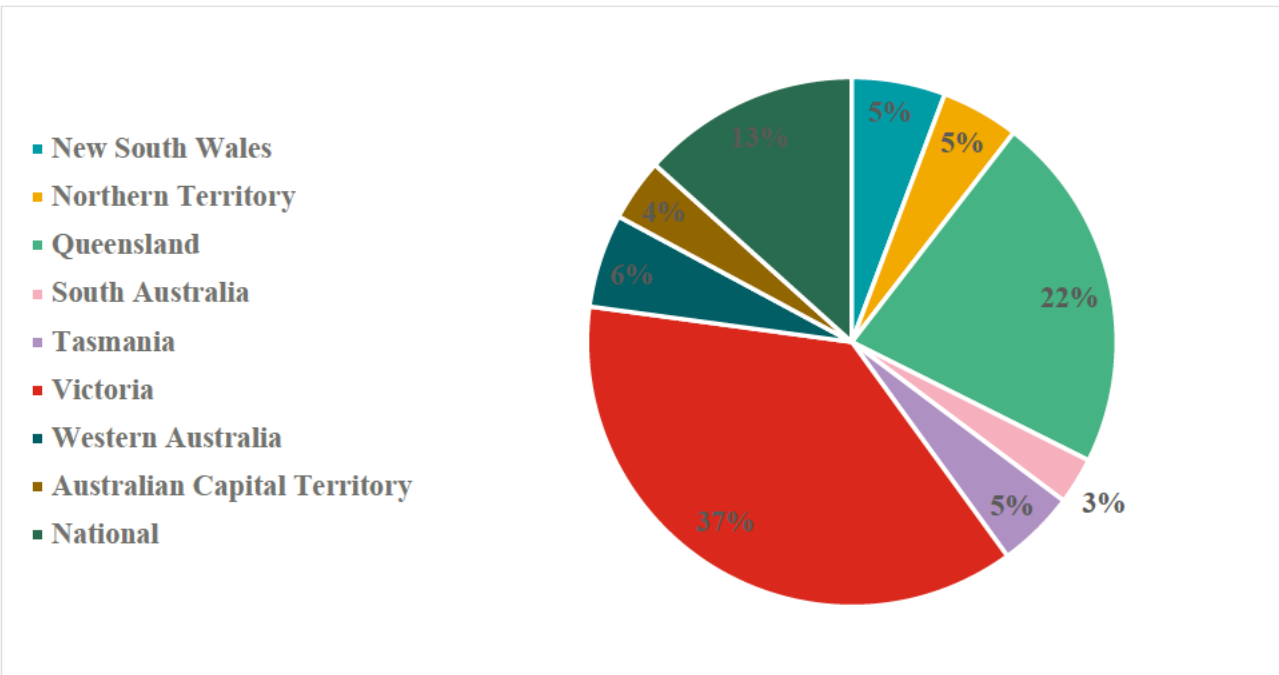
survey respondents were also invited to describe their role, the results of which are presented in Figure 1 (below). One-third of respondents identified as frontline practitioners.

Figure 1: Current role of survey respondents



Survey respondents were asked to identify which state or territory they predominately work in. Respondents were given the option of selecting as many states and territories that apply to their role, and also to select 'national'. While there was significantly more survey responses received from individuals working in Victoria and Queensland, survey responses were received from individuals in every Australian state and territory. 22% of respondents also identified as holding roles with a national focus.

Figure 2: Geographical location in which survey respondents predominately work in



Data analysis

Data collection and analysis occurred iteratively throughout the consultation period. Findings from the rapid evidence and policy review informed development of the interview and focus group discussion guide and the online stakeholder survey. Emerging findings from the qualitative consultations were used to inform subsequent stages of the consultation process, including testing and refinement of the proposed priority actions with selected stakeholders. This iterative approach enabled the project team to progressively identify areas of consensus, refine emerging recommendations and ensure the final priority actions reflected both the existing evidence base and contemporary stakeholder perspectives.

Each interview and focus group was audio recorded (with participant consent) and transcribed in full. All transcripts were imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software and analysed thematically by the project co-leads. In addition to the interview and focus group transcripts, written comments provided by participants through the Zoom chat function during consultation sessions were also included in the qualitative analysis. The analysis involved familiarisation with the data, systematic coding of transcripts, identification of recurring patterns and themes, and iterative refinement of themes through discussion between the project co-leads. Particular attention was given to identifying areas of consensus across participants, emerging priorities, implementation challenges and recommendations for strengthening prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery and healing efforts for children and young people who experience violence and abuse.

Throughout this report, quotations from consultation participants have been included to illustrate key themes and priorities identified during the consultation process. All quotations have been de-identified to protect participant confidentiality. Where possible, the report indicates whether particular views were expressed by the majority of participants, by many participants, or by a smaller number of participants. This approach provides greater transparency regarding the level of support for particular findings while recognising that the consultation was qualitative in nature and was not designed to establish statistical representativeness.

The survey data was analysed using descriptive statistical methods. Responses to the ranking and multiple-choice questions were examined to identify the actions receiving the highest levels of stakeholder support across each of the four pillars of the National Plan: Prevention, Early Intervention, Response, and Recovery and Healing. Open-ended survey responses were analysed thematically and integrated with the interview and focus group findings to identify recurring priorities, additional recommendations and areas where respondents identified gaps in the proposed actions.

Findings from the qualitative consultations, the online survey and the rapid evidence and policy review were then triangulated to inform the final priority actions, findings and recommendations presented throughout this report.

Including the voices of child victim-survivors

While this consultation primarily engaged adult stakeholders from across the policy, research, service delivery and advocacy sectors, a central objective of the project was to ensure that the perspectives and lived expertise of children and young people remain at the forefront. To support this objective, the report incorporates de-identified quotations from children and young people who have previously participated in research led by Kate Fitz-Gibbon examining experiences of domestic, family and sexual violence. These quotations have been drawn from four Australian research projects: the Silence and Inaction study (Fitz-Gibbon, 2025a, cited as StudyA), the I Believe You study (Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023, cited as StudyB), the Trust, Stability and Safety report (Fitz-Gibbon, 2026, cited as StudyC), the Safe Steps Seeking Help in Their Own Right report (Fitz-Gibbon, 2025b, cited as StudyD) and the Listen to her, Act now Report (Fitz-Gibbon & Meyer, 2023, cited as StudyE). Each of these

projects was specifically designed to centre children's and young people's own accounts of violence, help-seeking and recovery.

The decision to incorporate these existing lived experience narratives reflects a commitment to maximising the value of the contributions already made by children and young people who have generously shared their experiences through previous research. Rather than repeatedly asking children and young people to recount experiences of violence within multiple consultation processes, this approach seeks to ensure that their voices continue to inform policy development and systems reform, while minimising the burden associated with repeated participation in research. It also recognises the need to ensure that the voices and experiences of children and young people continue to shape national conversations about addressing domestic, family and sexual violence.

Throughout this report, these quotations are used alongside findings from the stakeholder consultations, online survey and rapid evidence review. They are not presented as additional consultation data for this project; rather, they provide an important lived experience lens through which the consultation findings can be understood.

RECOGNISING PROGRESS THAT HAS BEEN MADE

At the outset of each of the interviews and focus groups, and in the first substantive question included within the survey, stakeholders were invited to share what progress specific to children and young people who experience violence and abuse had been achieved since the introduction of the national Plan in 2022 and under the first National Action Plan. Stakeholders consistently acknowledged that important progress has been made. However, there was a consistent view across the interviews, focus groups and survey responses that this progress has been limited and inconsistent across states and territories, and that progress has not been linear. As captured in the following survey responses:

"TBH, I feel like we are going backwards". (Survey respondent)

"Stagnant - two steps forward and four back". (Survey respondent)

"I am concerned that there have been little-to-no meaningful changes in outcomes for children and young people. I am concerned that there are still significant and pernicious barriers to young people accessing safe supports". (Survey respondent)

Nevertheless, stakeholders did identify some important areas in which progress has been made, particularly strengthening recognition of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, improving understanding of the impacts of violence and abuse, and ad hoc progress in expanding practice responses for children and young people. Each of these are examined in the following section.

Greater recognition of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right

The most consistent area of progress identified across the interviews, focus groups and survey responses was the increasing recognition of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right. Stakeholders reflected that, over recent years, there has been a significant conceptual shift away from viewing children primarily through the experiences of their non-offending protective parent, towards recognising that children experience violence and abuse directly, with their own rights, needs, help-seeking and support requirements. Stakeholders consistently identified this as the most important indication of progress under the National Plan and one that has helped elevate children's experiences within policy, research and service responses over the last five years. As captured in the following three survey responses:

"I think Australia's greatest progress has been recognising children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, rather than seeing them only as part of the victim/survivor experience of violence". (Survey respondent)

"The clearest progress has been the shift toward recognising children and young people as rights holders and victim-survivors in their own right, rather than folding their experiences into "women and children" as an afterthought". (Survey respondent)

"Shifting the narrative to recognise children and young people as victims themselves, not only appendages to non-violent parents". (Survey respondent)

This recognition of progress was echoed throughout the interviews and focus groups. One stakeholder reflected that "there is more visibility of children and young people as victim survivors in their own right and with their own unique experiences of violence" (SectorExpertE). Another observed that "Over the last four years, definitely 10 years, we've all recognised that children are victims in their own right, and that's become a very clear practice message" (CommissionerD).

Importantly, while some areas of progress were specific to one state or territory, this indicator of progress was identified consistently nationally – with stakeholders from each of the states and territories speaking to it. As further evidenced in these two survey responses:

“From a Northern Territory perspective, the most meaningful progress under the First Action Plan has been the shift toward recognising children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, rather than as incidental witnesses to violence between adults. This reframing matters enormously in the NT, where children are disproportionately exposed to family, domestic and sexual violence (DFSV) and where the impacts compound across generations”. (Survey respondent)

“Government in WA is starting to recognise the children as victims' survivors and they require different support in DV sector”. (Survey respondent)

Several stakeholders noted that the increased recognition of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right had also created an authorising environment for greater inclusion of children's voices. While there was an identified need for greater fulfilment of the child's rights to participation and then importance of children's voices in policy decisions that impact them (as explored in later sections of this report), there was also recognition of progress. As three stakeholders described progress including:

“The amplification of victim-survivor voices, particularly those of young people.” (Survey respondent)

“children often get missed... I feel like there's more of a child's voice being shared and centred...” (FG)

“I think we've made much progress in hearing the voice of the young person and in the first person.” (SectorExpertW)

While stakeholders consistently welcomed this shift, many also emphasised that greater recognition has not yet translated into consistent implementation. For example, one survey respondent commented:

“Australia has made an important conceptual shift by recognising children as victim-survivors in their own right, but we have not yet implemented this consistently enough to claim strong, measurable national improvements in children's safety, recovery or long-term outcomes.” (Survey respondent)

Specifically, stakeholders often noted that, despite growing awareness within policy, research and practice, children's experiences continue to be overlooked in many service systems. Governments have not yet invested sufficiently in the child-specific responses required to improve children's safety, recovery and long-term wellbeing.

Greater awareness and understanding of children's experiences of violence and abuse

Across the consultations, numerous stakeholders identified the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS, see, among a range of other publications, Matthews et al., 2023) as one of the most significant developments in recent years, acknowledging that it has played a critical role in shaping national understanding of the prevalence of violence and abuse experienced by children and young people. Stakeholders described the study as providing a robust evidence base that has strengthened recognition of the scale and lifelong impacts of child maltreatment, informed policy and practice

discussions, and reinforced the need for greater investment in prevention and early intervention. This view is illustrated in the following comments:

"Government stakeholders at Australian level and at state and territory level have all, without exception, accepted the validity of those (ACMS) results... it certainly has changed the landscape of recognition, and in many cases, some policy and procedural responses as well in certain fields." (AcademicD)

"I think we see that through the Australian Child Maltreatment Study... I think that's been really important." (FG4)

"The Australian Child Maltreatment Study of 2023 has also done an incredible amount of work in bringing the prevalence and consequences of violence against children (in particular) into public discourse ... As a field of research, violence against children no longer feels like its in its infancy in Australia; it feels much more evolved." (Survey respondent)

However, stakeholders also emphasised that the challenge now lies in translating the findings from the ACMS into sustained policy reform, service expansion and funding commensurate with the evidenced scale of child maltreatment. As one stakeholder observed, the Australian Child Maltreatment Study has been "very, very helpful in just nailing some of that for Australia," but "it's about increased awareness and how we then move to action" (AcademicA).

Beyond the ACMS, some stakeholders also identified the Safe and Together framework as an important contribution to strengthening frontline responses to children and young people experiencing domestic and family violence (Mandel, 2013). Stakeholders described the framework as providing a shared language and common understanding for practitioners, particularly by strengthening recognition of children's experiences and maintaining a focus on the behaviour and responsibility of the person using violence. Two stakeholders explained:

"I also think the Safe and Together model has been really key. It's assisted to be able to unpack the perpetrator's pattern and to look at really keeping an eye on the pattern and how that affects kids and young people." (FG6)

"Safe and Together Model has provided an alternative framework that centres children and young people, partners with victim-survivor caregivers, and links the behaviours of the person using violence to the impact on the child and family safety, wellbeing, and stability." (Survey respondent)

Another stakeholder pointed to the framework's growing influence across different systems, noting that:

"...the federal circuit court (are) doing a piece of work with the Safe and Together Institute to roll out some training, family violence training across the federal court system, I think, is helpful." (FG6).

More generally, a number of stakeholders across the different consultation phases recognised that there had been progress in better understanding the range of harms experienced by children and young people. In particular, numerous stakeholders referenced increased awareness of, and better understanding of non-physical forms of domestic and family violence, including emotional abuse and coercive control, as progress. Reflecting on progress, stakeholders commented:

"I think the really good thing is how much more publicity and awareness there is of coercive control ... What is really positive is that we are talking about coercive control, we are talking about emotional abuse as part of family, domestic, and sexual violence." (CommissionerE)

*“The acknowledgement of the impact of emotional abuse, neglect and coercive control.”
(Survey respondent)*

There was also some recognition of the improved understandings of technology facilitated abuse and the need to better address digital harms. For example, two survey respondents commented:

“There have undeniably been significant advancements in recognising technology-facilitated abuse, especially in the advocacy for stronger accountability from tech companies for their complicity in this issue. There is a growing understanding of the commercial determinants that contribute to the escalation of violence against women and children.” (Survey respondent)

“There has also been stronger national recognition of issues like coercive control and technology-facilitated abuse, helping frontline workers identify risks earlier and respond more effectively.” (Survey respondent)

Extending this beyond victimisation, a small number of stakeholders also believed there had been progress in building greater understandings of the use of violence by children and young people and the need for a distinct service system response. For example, one survey respondent commented:

“There is also a better understanding that young people who use violence need developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed support, rather than being treated in the same way as adult perpetrators.” (Survey respondent)

Specifically, a number of stakeholders referenced the increase in the number of programs to address adolescent violence in the home, particularly in Victoria, since the Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016) as an area where progress has been made.

Development and delivery of respectful relationships education

Several stakeholders identified the expansion of Respectful Relationships Education (RRE) and consent education, including greater understandings of affirmative consent, as an important area of progress under the National Plan. Related, schools are increasingly recognised as a legitimate setting for primary prevention initiatives.

RRE is a school-based prevention initiative designed to prevent gender-based violence by promoting gender equality, respectful relationships and positive social norms (Our Watch, 2021b). It supports children and young people to develop the knowledge, empathy and skills to recognise unhealthy relationship behaviours, understand consent and respond appropriately to violence, bullying and harassment (Cahill et al., 2023).

Identifying RRE as a key example of progress made in recent years, two survey respondents commented:

“Australia has made its greatest progress in strengthening the systems, policies and awareness needed to prevent and respond to violence against children and young people. This includes greater recognition of coercive control and gender-based violence, stronger safeguarding and child safe frameworks, improved cross-sector collaboration, increased workforce capability, and a stronger focus on early intervention and prevention, particularly in education, community and youth settings. While significant challenges remain, there has been a clear shift from responding to violence after it occurs towards creating safer environments that reduce the risk of harm in the first place. I have seen particularly strong progress in the education sector, where institutions have invested in safeguarding, respectful relationships education, trauma-informed responses, and stronger governance to prevent and respond to gender-based violence.” (Survey respondent)

"There's also been a genuine (if uneven) increase in schools' understanding of the drivers of gendered violence, partly through frameworks like Change the Story, which has helped give prevention-focused organisations an evidence base to design programs against." (Survey respondent)

Similar views were expressed by some stakeholders in the focus groups and interviews. For example, in identifying areas where progress has been made, two stakeholders reflected:

"I think there's an increasing recognition of the role of schools, and the role of that kind of more universal approach to prevention through respectful relationships ... I think respectful relationships, and the way that that's embedded in Victorian schools, certainly stands out to us." (FG5)

"...there have been some steps forward recently in this domain in relation to consent education and respectful relationships, and I see this as a glimmer of hope..." (AcademicD)

At the same time, however, stakeholders also consistently emphasised that development of the Curriculum needs to evolve to better reflect children's contemporary experiences, and the implementation of RRE has been inconsistent, two areas for action that are explored in the prevention section of this report.

Acknowledgement of other areas of progress

In addition to the themes discussed above, stakeholders identified a wide range of individual reforms, policies, programs and pilots that they considered had contributed to improved responses for children and young people experiencing violence and abuse. These examples were generally raised by individual stakeholders or within particular jurisdictions, rather than emerging as consistent themes across the interviews, focus groups and survey responses. Collectively, however, they illustrate the breadth of reforms that stakeholders considered important in strengthening Australia's response.

Ad hoc examples identified by stakeholders as indicators of progress included:

- implementation of recommendations arising from the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence, including the child information sharing reforms and the development of the Child and Young Person Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) framework (to be released in the second half of 2026),
- reforms to the Family Law Act, particularly the removal of the presumption of equal shared parental responsibility,
- the development of child-specific domestic and family violence pilot initiatives in several state and territory jurisdictions, and
- regulatory reforms to improve children's online safety, including the social media minimum age requirements and age verification measures.

There was also some recognition of broader social policy reforms as indicators of progress by strengthening the wellbeing and safety of children and families, including paid parental leave and paid domestic and family violence leave provisions. Although these reforms were recognised as positive developments, stakeholders often described them as isolated examples of progress rather than evidence of a coordinated national approach to improving outcomes for children and young people experiencing violence and abuse.

*“My school did a really good job informing me
about how my experience (sexual assault) was a form of child abuse
and I think they approached my situation very well –
as well as referring me to ... the right support service ...
and helping me to adjust my study timetable
because they knew what was going on.”*

(Caitlin, cited in StudyB)

*“It's really, really important to have a safe space
or somewhere you're able to express yourself
and be loved unconditionally.
And I think that has a huge part in how your mental health is
or how you are and what your wellbeing is like.”*

(Amira, cited in StudyB)

RECOGNISING GAPS AND CHALLENGES IN CURRENT POLICY AND PRACTICE

During each interview and focus group, stakeholders were asked to share the most significant challenges currently facing: i) children and young people who experience domestic, family and sexual violence; and ii) children and young people at-risk of or already harming others. Often times, the responses to these questions substantially influenced the focus of the subsequent discussions. The challenges most often raised are reflected throughout the remainder of this document most particularly in the actions identified as having received broad based support.

In this section we describe key overarching gaps and challenges identified by stakeholders throughout the consultations. These challenges cut across the National Plan and sit at a level above the specific pillars of prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing. In addition, we have also drawn attention to several issues that, while not covered in detail throughout this report, are challenges that stakeholders identified as requiring attention as part of efforts to address domestic, family and sexual violence experienced by children and young people.

Frustration regarding the lack of action to meet children and young people's needs

Almost without exception, while acknowledging there has been progress recognising children and young people as victim survivors in their own right (as examined in the previous section), stakeholders expressed significant frustration regarding the lack of action focused on meeting children's needs at all levels of government. One Children's Commissioner commented:

"The way we do policy in this country, it is all about adults, it's done by adults for adults. Children will always be peripheral, and will always be struggling to get their voices enacted. I think that is a sort of a fundamental governance structure problem. That is a key barrier that needs to be articulated and identified and addressed." (Commissioner B)

Overwhelmingly, stakeholders pointed to responses to children and young people that have been "bolted onto" a response primarily design for, and delivered to adults. Often times when a service was being provided for children and young people, it was not sufficiently resourced. For example, practitioners shared that this occurs where services are not funded to see children as individual clients but are doing so in response to direct presentations to the service. Reflecting the sentiment across many discussions across the consultations, one stakeholder shared:

"We have built a very adult centric family violence response system that just doesn't work for young people .. very unwelcoming for young people and it's not in the places where young people already are. As one young person with lived experience relayed, they would never answer a phone call from a number they don't recognise from an Orange Door here in Victoria. It's just not a model that's designed from the ground up in a way that works and is responsive to young people's needs ... And so, our responses to young people as a result of that are contingent on coming into contact with the system through a parent and even then, we don't always do a particularly adequate job in responding to those young people's needs in their own right but independent young people whose parent either doesn't want support or isn't protective or a whole myriad of factors that might influence why the parent will or won't engage with the service system for support, in the absence of that, there's such profound barriers for young people to actually get support." (FG2)

This failure to genuinely put children's safety needs, risks and associated rights at the centre of government efforts to address domestic, family and sexual violence across Australian states and territories underpins a range of required actions put forward in this report, particularly under the pillars of early intervention, response, recovery and healing.

Children and young people are not a political priority and, while absolutely necessary, efforts to elevate their voices presents risks

In seeking to explain why there has been such limited action taken by successive governments at the federal, state and territory levels to improve safety and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people who experience violence and abuse, several stakeholders pointed to the limited political power held by children and young people. As one Commissioner put succinctly, "adults vote and children don't" (CommissionerA). This dynamic was highlighted as an underlying reason for the lack of progress taking action that responds to children and young people's needs. Another stakeholder remarked:

"Politicians don't care enough, there aren't votes for kids, so prioritising children's rights is not on the table ... I genuinely don't think politicians care enough." (AcademicC)

In recent years there has been a significant increase in the engagement of, and platform given to youth advocates in this field, including those who bring their own lived experience of victimisation and navigating the system. While more young people are engaged and shaping policy direction, there was also a recognition among stakeholders consulted that many voices are not "at the table". For instance, one youth advocate shared:

"All through my teenage years, my early adulthood, and I searched and I knocked on doors and I asked people, and I wanted to have a seat at the table, but the door wasn't opened for me ... there are so many young people who really want to have a say, but will never be asked to consult, you know, and so how do we create opportunities for the everyday young person to have a say, not just one who's built a profile." (YouthAdvocateA)

There were also concerns expressed about the expectations placed on young people with lived experience who are advocating on domestic, family and sexual violence policy. Against the backdrop of young people having limited political power, efforts to elevate their voice are absolutely needed. However, doing this safely was recognised as an ongoing challenge by some stakeholders consulted. One stakeholder shared:

"What really struck me was like, who's checking in on this young person at the end of the day, and where is the safety? ... Because we see a lot of these lived experience young people, and they burn out, and we see them jump back, you know, and I've seen (redacted) speak and go, wow, I didn't mean to disclose so much, and like we actually really need to support these young people ...we say you don't have to be identify yourself as a survivor, my view is that in any room we should be assuming that there's a lot of lived experience. There's a lot of adults at any given table that that you and I that we'll all sit around that won't have disclosed their abuse, but it doesn't mean that they shouldn't have a seat at that table. And I think that we need to be really cautious about how we approach the lived experience and survivor experience with our young people, because they can't take it back ... So we need to we need to slow down, in my view, and think a bit more deeply about how we involve young people." (SectorExpertF)

As youth advisory groups become more common at the federal and state level, and the value of lived experience in co-design and production of policies, services and programs is increasingly recognised, some stakeholders pointed to the need for national guidance to ensure good practice, an action that is set out in subsequent sections of this report. Further, and to complement the perspectives of

children and young people with lived and living experience, alternative sources of lived experience should not be overlooked including from adult survivors of child maltreatment, particularly child sexual abuse where there is a well-evidenced long period on average between the experience of victimisation and the first point of disclosure, and from those within the workforce.

Children and young people are not a homogeneous group

So often, particularly in policy discourse, children and young people are referred to without any reference to important differences within this broad cohort. In some respects, this has limited opportunities for nuanced discussions regarding the differing needs of children and young people by age, developmental stage, circumstantial need and cohorts, and the importance of tailoring responses to specific identities and life experiences. Mirroring the views of a number of stakeholders across the consultations, one focus group participant shared:

“When you’re talking about the invisibility even in the family violence response and journey, sometimes that intersectional approach to be able to recognise some of the extra intersecting barriers for those cohorts around system oppression, around discrimination, around islamophobia, around racism ... I think the question is, is the intervention actually designed to accommodate that intersectional need? Is it visible enough? It is accommodating enough? Is it actually inviting enough?” (FG2)

Throughout the consultation, some stakeholders highlighted the rich diversity that exists among children and young people including related to culture, geographic location, sexuality, disability and developmental stage. Where common themes emerged related to this diversity, we have highlighted these throughout the report. Inevitably, given the purpose of this consultation, the actions identified sit at a level of aggregation that does not sufficiently acknowledge nor do justice to this diversity. Instead, the actions identified are “system-wide” with the need to tailor responses as part of detailed design, implementation and delivery. We have not sought to complete that work through this consultation project. However, neither do we underestimate the importance of reflecting the diversity that exists among children and young people as part of efforts to meaningfully address and more effectively prevent their experiences of all forms of domestic, family and sexual violence.

Government run punitive family law, child protection and youth justice systems are adversely impacting victim-survivors

A recurring theme throughout the consultation was the tremendous harm inflicted by government run punitive systems, including the family law, child protection and youth justice systems. This was particularly the case in relation to the federal family law system, and subsequent family court decisions and processes which impacted upon children and young people. In the focus groups and interviews this system was the most often singled out point for criticism. For instance, stakeholders shared:

“Like there is a legitimacy issue with the family court, they lack they lack legitimacy because people don't trust them. Women are walking away with permanent psychosocial injuries from the family court.” (AcademicB)

“Overall, the bent is still towards parental rights. Children don't have standing in the family courts. Children don't have standing or much of a voice, or visibility, or input into state protection order or criminal matters.” (FG5)

These identified points of risk and harm within the court were viewed as significant but not insurmountable. Noting that the family court system is federally controlled, stakeholders identified opportunities for the federal government to take greater action to improve child safety within court processes, and to ensure that the court is intervening at the earliest point to identify risks and address

needs among young victim-survivors who come before it. For instance, through the focus groups and interviews, two stakeholders shared:

“The other thing that I would flag, because I think there's real opportunity here, is family law ... thinking about the fact that a lot of families that were previously not visible to the service system are entering through the family court system, and how do we make the family court part of the response to gender-based violence? It is probably, like in a sense, the most direct exposure that the Commonwealth has to the issue ... I think there are opportunities to be more strategic about the family court as an entry into a service system where people leave in a better state than they enter.” (Academic B)

“We just don't have services in the family court system, for example. We don't have services that we can refer children to... have a child wellbeing service attached to the family courts children's service. Not in the evidentiary, judicially-determined sort of arm, but a separate service that is staffed by family consultants under the legislation, which means it's inadmissible, what children say in that environment.” (FG5)

Both the child protection and the youth justice system were also frequently identified by stakeholders as not meeting the needs and, often times, harming children and young people who have experienced violence or abuse. There was a clear acknowledgement of the limits of punitive systems broadly and the need for earlier therapeutic interventions in the lives of children impacted by violence and abuse. For example, one survey respondent commented:

Many children and young people who have experienced violence from their parents and in their families go on to be punished by state systems that see them as perpetrators and aggressors, and don't recognise the opportunities for prevention, education and early intervention that were missed, or could still be pursued - to divert these children and young people's lives away from police vans and prison cells, and back to classrooms, accessing healthcare and meaningful work. (Survey respondent)

While it is not the purpose of this report to provide an exhaustive critique of either of these systems, specific to the child protection system, across the consultations, we heard consistently from stakeholders that the system often responds after harm has already escalated, that there can be unjust expectations placed on women victim-survivors to keep children safe, that the system itself can perpetuate further harm, and that children who are child protection engaged are often experiencing other forms of disadvantage that remain unaddressed through statutory intervention.

On the youth justice system there was clear acknowledgement among stakeholders in the interviews and focus groups that children and young people who come into contact with the youth justice system more often than not have histories of domestic, family and sexual violence, child protection involvement, and have experiences other forms of trauma and structural disadvantage. Noting that these consultations occurred at a time when there have been recent punitive reforms to expand detention, reduce diversion and increase sentencing options for children in conflict with the law, stakeholders frequently identified that the operation of youth justice across Australia is increasingly inconsistent with children's rights as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Noting the opportunity of the Second Action Plan, some stakeholders advocated for more trauma-informed and therapeutic responses to be embedded within youth justice facilities, and for there to be a greater focus on education engagement, family support and early diversion to avoid the criminalisation of child victim-survivors (see also Fitz-Gibbon and Tyler, 2026, on consultation findings specific to the youth justice system).

Understanding perpetration and responding to perpetrators of violence against children

Australia will not make progress on efforts to prevent violence and abuse against children without a greater understanding of and focus on perpetration. Interestingly, throughout the consultations, there was not a strong focus on addressing adult perpetration of violence against children. While there was recognition of the need for accountability for people who use violence, few stakeholders focused on the specific actions needed to better understand and improve responses to adults using violence against children and young people.

Over recent years, there have been several studies examining the prevalence of both child sexual abuse, sexual violence and men's use of intimate partner violence (see, for example, Salter et al, 2023; Volpe et al, 2025; Doherty & Dowling, 2024). There has also been a greater focus on pathways into using violence and harmful sexual behaviours among young people (see, for example, McKibbin et al., 2023; Boxall et al., 2022). There is a need to continue to strengthen this evidence base particularly related to understanding the factors that could facilitate a meaningful reduction in the use of violence. Perhaps most importantly, this evidence should be drawn upon to improve prevention efforts and earlier interventions, as well as informing the development and delivery of a suite of effective responses.

The statement from victim-survivors in the front end of the National Plan (DSS, 2022, at 8-9) states: "Abuse and violence is a problem for victims, but it is not the victims' problem." This statement is often cited in policy discussions on men's violence against adult women, but the same lens has not translated across to efforts to better address child victimisation. With this in mind, the Second Action Plan should include a clear focus on bringing the person using violence to the forefront of efforts to address domestic, family and sexual violence experienced by children and young people.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE SECOND ACTION PLAN

1. Actions under the Prevention pillar



Throughout the interviews, focus groups and survey responses, stakeholders argued that Australia has not made significant progress in preventing violence against children. Stakeholders argued that, despite growing recognition of the importance of primary prevention in ending violence against women, comparatively little attention has been directed towards preventing violence against children in its own right. As one survey respondent commented:

"We have not had a clear priority on the prevention of violence against children in our plans." (Survey respondent)

The recommended actions in this section reflect the areas where stakeholders believed national leadership could have the greatest preventative impact. Collectively, these actions seek to strengthen Australia's prevention architecture by embedding children's rights within policy and legislation, investing in evidence-based primary prevention, and creating the conditions in which all children and young people can grow up free from violence. As one survey respondent reflected:

"Prevention has to be where our heads are collectively at... We are not in a position to avoid investment... in prevention anymore when the evidence is so clear that it works and changes not just the trajectory of a single life, but the lives of entire generations." (Survey respondent)

The following section details the actions recommended for the Second Action Plan relevant to the Prevention pillar.

A National Framework for the Prevention of Violence against Children

Throughout the consultation, stakeholders noted that Australia currently lacks a dedicated, evidence-informed framework for the prevention of violence against children. Some stakeholders contrasted Australia's nationally recognised prevention architecture for violence against women with the absence of an equivalent framework for violence against children. Rather than viewing this as a criticism of existing frameworks, stakeholders argued that children deserve the same evidence base and longer-term investment in prevention that violence against women has received since the introduction of the first National Plan, and the establishment of a dedicated national agency.

Building on this, stakeholders often reflected on the significant contribution that Change the Story (Our Watch, 2021a) has made to advancing Australia's understanding of the primary prevention of violence against women. However, they also emphasised that this framework was never intended to explain or prevent violence against children. As one stakeholder explained:

"Change the Story is not and has never intended to be a framework for preventing violence against children ... It's never set out to identify what drives violence against children... it's never been that whole of population, what are the drivers of adult violence against children in the first place, and how do we address them, and how do we stop this from happening?" (SectorExpertN)

Building on this, stakeholders consistently argued that Australia's current prevention architecture has largely been designed around preventing violence against adult women, with comparatively little attention paid to preventing violence against children in their own right. While recognising the interconnected nature of these forms of violence, stakeholders emphasised that children have distinct developmental needs, experience different forms of violence, and require their own dedicated prevention framework, policy responses and investment. As one stakeholder questioned:

"Are we fitting an adult framework for children and young people?"

Similarly, another stakeholder reflected:

"I have been a longtime supporter of Change the Story... at least it tells the story of how to bring about change. And I don't think we've got the same thing articulated for children." (FG1)

A number of survey respondents echoed these concerns, commenting:

"There is no clear national articulation of what preventing violence against children actually requires." (Survey respondent)

"Children have largely been incorporated into existing prevention work rather than recognised as requiring their own dedicated prevention framework." (Survey respondent)

"Without a dedicated framework there is no shared roadmap for governments, schools, services or communities." (Survey respondent)

"Unlike violence against women, Australia still lacks a coordinated, evidence-informed national prevention approach that is centred on children's unique developmental needs. A dedicated framework would provide a consistent foundation for policy, investment, evaluation and accountability across governments and sectors." (Survey respondent)

When asked, consultation participants expressed strong support for the development of Australia's first National Framework for the Prevention of Violence against Children. Stakeholders described current prevention efforts for violence against children as fragmented, inconsistent and insufficiently coordinated across jurisdictions and settings. They argued that a dedicated national framework would establish a shared evidence base, articulate the drivers of violence against children, provide common prevention goals and outcomes, guide consistent implementation across sectors, and strengthen accountability for sustained investment in preventing violence before it occurs. As one survey respondent explained:

"A national framework (where it is living document not a rigid rule book) provides a guide and a measurement for all levels of community and government. It reduces fragmentation and siloing and guides national cohesive strategy while also holding government and services to account." (Survey respondent)

Across the interviews, focus groups and survey, stakeholders suggested that the Framework should:

- articulate a nationally agreed evidence base on the drivers of violence against children and the actions required to prevent it,
- establish a shared vision, principles and long-term outcomes for preventing violence against children across Australia,
- complement, rather than duplicate, existing national prevention frameworks focused on violence against women and recognise the intersections between these forms of violence,
- adopt a child rights-based, trauma-informed, developmentally informed and culturally safe approach to prevention,
- recognise that prevention must occur across the settings in which children live, learn and play, including families, early childhood education and care, schools, sporting organisations, youth services, online environments, health services and community settings,
- embed children's participation in the design, implementation and ongoing review of prevention initiatives, consistent with Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and
- support self-determined prevention initiatives led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations.

Stakeholders consistently emphasised that preventing violence against children requires a whole-of-community approach. While schools were recognised as playing a critical role, stakeholders cautioned against locating responsibility for prevention solely within education settings. Instead, they argued that every setting in which children live, learn and participate should contribute to preventing violence before it occurs. As one survey respondent commented, "violence prevention needs to be embedded wherever children spend their lives."

Stakeholders repeatedly cautioned that developing a framework alone would not improve outcomes for children. Rather, they stressed that its value would depend on sustained implementation, investment and accountability. Stakeholders consistently argued that the framework should include measurable outcomes, long-term funding commitments, regular monitoring and public reporting, and evaluation of prevention initiatives to ensure that investment is directed towards approaches that demonstrably improve outcomes for children and young people. Without these implementation mechanisms, stakeholders cautioned that a national framework risks becoming another policy document without meaningful impact on children's lives.

Recommended Action: The Australian Government, in partnership with state and territory governments, should lead the development of Australia's first National Framework for the Primary Prevention of Violence against Children.

The Framework should be developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, children and young people, researchers and the community sector. The Framework should be reviewed every five years to ensure it remains responsive to emerging evidence and children's changing experiences of violence. Alongside the framework, a national organisation should be adequately resourced with responsibility for driving implementation of the framework into cross-sector practice.

*“They [schools] talk about what’s right and wrong
in like relationships and like sex and all of that.
But they don’t actually talk about the actual deep stuff of it.
They don’t talk enough about the violence and just yeah,
the deeper stuff ...
first red flags and stuff like that would be really helpful.”*

(Anna, cited in StudyA)

*“We were taught about stranger danger,
but no one ever talked about
what to do if the danger was inside your own home.”*

(Fern, cited in StudyA)

*“Before it happened, I was quite clueless.
I think if I had known about these things,
maybe I would have known how to handle it properly ... “*

(Mark, cited in StudyA)

Update and strengthen the implementation of Respectful Relationships Education

Throughout the consultations, stakeholders frequently noted that while progress to develop and implement Respect Relationships Education (RRE) in Australia has been a key indicator of progress (see earlier report discussion), the curriculum needs to be revised to reflect children's contemporary experiences. Specific to the survey, 44 per cent of survey respondents ranked "the need to update school-based initiatives (including Respectful Relationships Education, RRE) to better reflect young peoples lived experiences, including their online lives and experiences of coercive control", in the top five prevention actions that they would most like to see included in the Second Action Plan.

Stakeholders repeatedly noted that children are growing up in an environment that has shifted considerably since the curriculum was first developed. As one survey respondent commented:

We have heard from children and young people in Tasmania that respectful relationships education can and should be improved, they said: 'We want sex education that reflects our real lives and diverse experiences, promoting emotional, mental, and physical safety.' (Survey respondent)

Numerous stakeholders cited the new forms of digital violence and abuse that are not adequately addressed through existing curriculum. Stakeholders consistently observed that children and young people are navigating online environments that have changed significantly since Respectful Relationships Education was first developed, with emerging technologies creating new opportunities for harm. Stakeholders argued that the curriculum should better prepare children to recognise and respond to technology-facilitated abuse, including image-based abuse, digital coercive control, deepfakes, online grooming and the influence of violent pornography on relationships and gender norms. Two survey respondents commented:

"Digital harms, deepfakes, image-based abuse, exposure to violent pornography, are evolving faster than formal curriculum content can keep up with. Updating RRE to reflect this, alongside dedicated digital safety education, addresses the area where current prevention content is furthest behind young people's actual lived experience." (Survey respondent)

"Online environments increasingly shape young people's attitudes and behaviours. Prevention must include education and interventions that counter harmful online content and support healthy, respectful digital relationships." (Survey respondent)

This view was reinforced throughout the interviews and focus groups. One stakeholder reflected that "you've got to introduce pretty early the counters to pornography... someone with harmful sexual behaviours said, help us manage pornography and help us manage it earlier", emphasising the importance of equipping children with the knowledge and critical thinking skills needed to navigate increasingly complex online environments.

Importantly, throughout the interviews and focus groups, stakeholders also consistently recognised that because of the high prevalence of child victimisation, many children experiencing violence are already sitting in classrooms when Respectful Relationships Education is delivered. Stakeholders observed that, for some children, participation in RRE is the first time they recognise that their own experiences constitute abuse, creating an important opportunity to support disclosure, help-seeking and earlier access to specialist support. As one stakeholder reflected:

I sometimes wonder whether we've grappled with the fact that we're talking to children in any room, where 30% of those children may have had - probably have had a trauma experience. And we're going in there and we're just leaning into the psycho model, ignoring what we know about the impact of trauma on children's neurodevelopment and we're just

trying this one size fits all and we're not changing behaviour and we're wondering why. (FG4)

This has also been noted in research with child victim-survivors in South Australia (Fitz-Gibbon, 2025a). As a result, stakeholders argued that RRE should be designed not only as a universal prevention initiative, but also as an important early intervention opportunity.

Stakeholders stressed that the curriculum should incorporate age- and developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to recognise unsafe behaviours and patterns of abuse, respond safely when peers disclose experiences of harm, understand where and how to access specialist support, and build confidence to disclose and seek help themselves. On this, stakeholders commented:

"Children need to learn safe ways to speak up... and feel confident reporting if they need to." (Survey respondent)

"...what we know is that young people are going to other young people first. You know, victim survivors are going to their friends first rather than adults. So it's where you know all the relationship, respectful relationship work is really really important..." (AcademicA)

Stakeholders also observed that young people are increasingly receiving messages about relationships, gender and sexuality from social media, online influencers, pornography and other digital platforms. Stakeholders argued that, if Respectful Relationships Education is to remain relevant and effective, it must provide content that is credible, engaging and reflective of children's lived experiences, while equipping them to critically evaluate the harmful messages they encounter online. One survey respondent commented:

"Many [young people] experience it as scripted or disconnected from their lives, while highly engaging online 'manosphere' content offers more appealing messaging." (Survey respondent)

Stakeholders recommended that improvements in engagement could also be achieved by making the curriculum more relevant to young people's contemporary lives and by co-designing resources with young people. The co-design process could extend beyond consultation during curriculum development to include the ongoing involvement of children and young people in reviewing and refining resources over time, ensuring the curriculum remains relevant as children's experiences and digital environments continue to evolve.

Recommended Action: Update and strengthen the implementation of Respectful Relationships Education to better reflect children and young people's contemporary experiences and improve early identification, help-seeking and support for young victim-survivors.

Effective implementation of the revised RRE curriculum will require investment in teacher training including related to responding to disclosures, high-quality resources, school leadership, co-design processes with young people and clear referral pathways to specialist support services when children disclose experiences of violence or abuse. There should also be a review of the policy cycle associated with updating the curriculum to avoid ongoing challenges related to the curriculum failing to reflect contemporary challenges in young people's lives.

Repeal defences to corporal punishment

During the focus groups and interviews, stakeholders were asked if they thought the Second Action Plan should include any actions to address corporal punishment in Australia. The Australian Child Maltreatment study revealed that 'corporal punishment remains unacceptably high' in Australia, with over 60 per cent of Australians experiencing corporal punishment during childhood (Haslam et al., 2023, at 580). Defined as the use of physical force for the purpose of behavioural discipline or correction by causing pain, but not injury, corporal punishment can include hitting, pushing, punching, slapping or other physical forms of physical force against a child (Donnelly & Straus, 2005; see also Haslam et al., 2023, at 580).

While the prevalence of corporal punishment is declining globally (Finkelhor et al., 2019), and there has been significant reform in countries worldwide to remove criminal defences and prohibit corporal punishment (Havighurst et al., 2023), across Australia – while the specific of state and territory legislation and common law varies – the use of 'reasonable' physical force for the purpose of parental discipline is still permitted (Haslam et al., 2023; Havighurst et al., 2023). This is despite recommendations and calls from the Australian Human Rights Commission (2019), South Australian Royal Commission into Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence (2025), the Australian College of Physicians (2013) among others for the repeal of relevant laws.

Stakeholders consistently expressed support for the repeal of legal defences to corporal punishment as an important children's rights reform and a necessary step towards ensuring Australian law consistently recognises every child's right to live free from violence. Stakeholders argued that permitting physical punishment under law undermines this principle and reinforces the social acceptability of violence against children. As one academic remarked:

"It is patently absurd that we continue to make this lawful in this country by allowing under law the physical disciplining of children... it's a fundamental breach of dignity and children's rights... it continues that culture that permits violence against children... it's long past time." (AcademicD)

A survey respondent agreed, questioning:

"how can we be looking at solutions for violence, dealing with the impacts of abuse and neglect and solutions for youth justice when it is still lawful to assault a child?" (Survey respondent)

Stakeholders argued that the continued existence of legal defences for "reasonable force", "reasonable chastisement" or "domestic discipline" sends an inconsistent message by condemning violence against children in some contexts while permitting it in others. This inconsistency was well-captured in remarks made by one of the Commissioners interviewed:

"No child should be subject to physical abuse or assault... I'd like to smack you across the face, Premier, but that would be illegal... so why isn't it illegal for me to do it to my own child?... What's the double standard at play there?" (CommissionerD)

Several stakeholders also commented that these legal inconsistencies extend beyond legislation by shaping broader community attitudes about what forms of violence against children are considered acceptable. As one stakeholder observed:

"I think a big part of education is modelling... I don't know that we can be hitting children and telling them not to hit someone." (SectorExpertAS)

Although legal in nature, stakeholders consistently viewed this recommendation as a mechanism for changing the social norms that continue to legitimise violence against children. Two survey respondents commented:

"I believe it is critical that violence against children as a form of discipline is not normalised and that there are clear public campaigns around the damage that it does and the need for repeal of legislation allowing 'reasonable force'." (Survey respondent)

"Changing the laws on corporal punishment should be the absolute starting point. The fact that it is still lawful, despite evidence of the ongoing damage it causes to emotional and physical health is incomprehensible. What is the point at which force is 'reasonable'? No force is reasonable against a child who needs safety and relies on adults for survival. It is an antiquated law that must change before anything else changes." (Survey respondent)

Stakeholders in the consultations explained that legislative reform alone would be insufficient to shift longstanding social norms regarding physical punishment of children. Instead, the repeal of relevant defences should be accompanied by a sustained public education campaign that communicates the harms associated with corporal punishment, explains children's rights to safety and protection, and supports parents to adopt alternatives to physical discipline.

Stakeholders believed that banning corporal punishment was also essential in ensuring that children understand their own right to live free from violence and abuse. One of the Commissioner's interviewed commented:

"...the fact that stopping corporal punishment is not a thing in Australia, says a lot about our culture and our views about the rights of children." (CommissionerB)

Similarly, other stakeholders involved in the consultations and survey commented:

"...children have rights to be safe and to not have their bodies touched or harmed by anyone." (SectorExpertAS)

"...it is critical that all children know that violence as a form of discipline is not supported at law so that they feel they can speak out and do not take on the shame of adults' behaviour." (Survey respondent)

As captured in these quotations, several stakeholders believed that the repeal of defences to corporal punishment would send a clear societal message that children, like adults, have an equal right to bodily integrity, dignity and protection from violence.

There was recognition among stakeholders that any law reform should also be accompanied by an increased investment in safe parenting programs to better support parents and caregivers. Survey respondents commented: ?

"Parents need a lot of support, they struggle with everyday living and they will let their frustrations out on their family." (Survey respondent)

"Supporting caregivers with evidence-based programs can help break intergenerational cycles of violence." (Survey respondent)

"Parents need to understand that how they parent impacts on children's development." (Survey respondent)

The need for parenting education in this space was previously recognised in the ANROWS funded Adolescent Family Violence in Australia study, which found there was a need to 'better educate

parents around the use of violence, its impact on children and the risk of intergenerational transmission and normalisation of violence” (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022b, at 27).

The inclusion of a community awareness campaign and investment in parenting programs was also seen as strategic to ensure that government action to repeal defences to corporal punishment is not interpreted as a punitive measure directed at parents but rather viewed as one component of a broader prevention approach needed to reduce child victimisation in Australia.

Survey respondents and stakeholders throughout the focus groups and interviews frequently acknowledged that repealing legal defences to corporal punishment is likely to be politically contested. One Commissioner interviewed observed that resistance often reflects attitudes such as “it happened to me, and look how I turned out” (CommissionerD), together with broader intergenerational beliefs that continue to impede acceptance of the growing evidence regarding the harms associated with corporal punishment. This is supported by the findings of the Australian Child Maltreatment Study which found that parents who experienced corporal punishment themselves were more likely to use corporal punishment in their own parenting (Haslam et al., 2023), highlighting the need to disrupt intergenerational pathways into using violence against children.

Despite acknowledging these challenges, stakeholders consistently argued that political contestation should not deter reform. Rather, they stressed that governments, and our political leaders specifically, have an important leadership role in driving social norm change where evidence demonstrates that longstanding practices cause harm to children.

Recommended Action: Repeal legislative defences to corporal punishment in every Australian jurisdiction, alongside a national awareness campaign and increased investment in evidence-based parenting support programs.

The Australian Government should work with states and territories to achieve nationally consistent repeal of legislative defences that permit the use of physical punishment against children. This reform should be accompanied by:

- a national public education campaign communicating children's right to live free from violence and support children to understand that physical punishment is not an acceptable form of discipline;
- evidence-based parenting education and support programs delivered across key developmental stages;
- culturally safe resources developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and other priority populations;
- ongoing monitoring of community attitudes and awareness following legislative reform.

*“My parents were brought up
and how other family members were brought up around me,
hitting your kids wasn’t really, like, a bad thing ...
it just happened so many times, and
I sort of saw the patterns in the cycle.”*

(Fern, cited in StudyA)

*It’s not just kids who need to learn –
adults need to unlearn the stuff they were taught too.”*

(David, cited in StudyA)

*“they feel that is still part of discipline,
whereas they are actually going extra miles ...
I think parents too need to be educated
on how they treat their children ...
I think general campaigns about that would have been
a preventive measure.”*

(Robert, cited in StudyA)

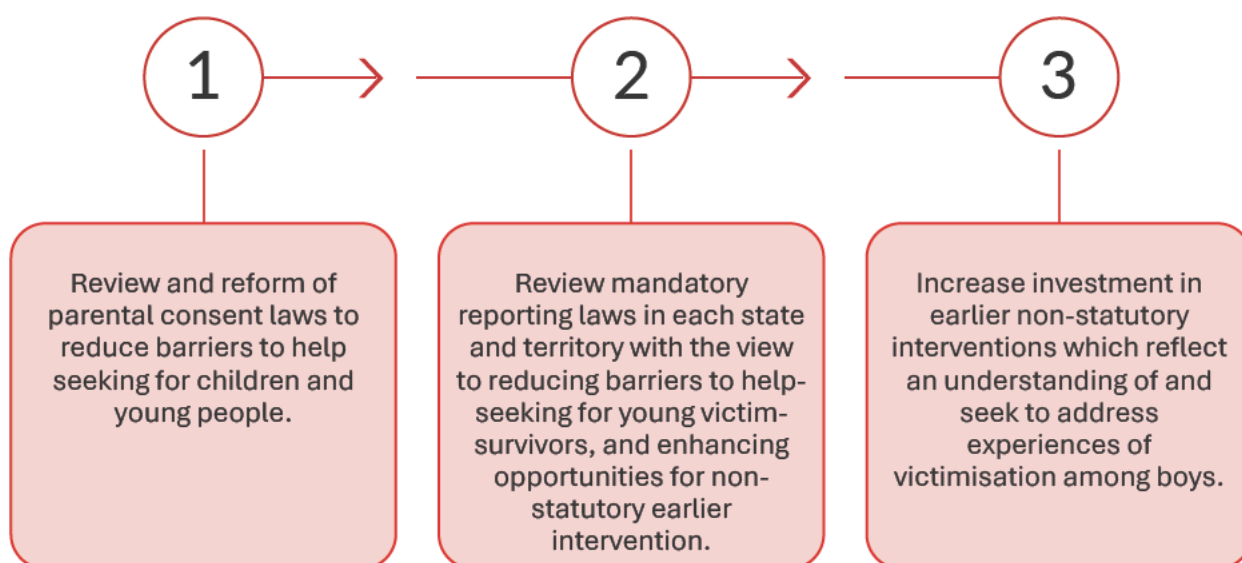
Other prevention related actions that were broadly supported through the focus groups and interviews:

- Greater regulation of online harms, including the implementation of a robust digital duty of care, stronger regulation of AI-enabled harms, and greater technology-platform accountability.
- Greater action to address the commercial determinants of violence against children, including stronger regulation of pornography, gambling, alcohol and online platforms that contribute to harmful attitudes and behaviours.
- Increase longer-term investment in primary prevention of violence against children, including funding from First-Nations led prevention initiatives.

Other prevention related actions that were broadly supported through the survey responses:

- Embed violence prevention within universal childhood settings, including early childhood education, schools, sporting organisations and youth services, to ensure prevention reaches children across a range of settings. This action was supported by 70 per cent of survey respondents (n=69).
- Support parents and caregivers with evidence-based prevention and early parenting programs, including programs targeted to key developmental transition points (pregnancy, early childhood, adolescence) to address problematic behaviours and to reduce intergenerational cycles of violence. This action was supported by 63 per cent of survey respondents (n=62).
- Commit to investment in First Nations led, self-determined prevention initiatives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, that address the structural drivers of violence affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. This action was supported by 58 per cent of survey respondents (n=57).
- Invest in peer-led prevention initiatives that equip children and young people with the confidence and skills to safely intervene, support friends and challenge harmful attitudes and behaviours. This action was supported by 41 per cent of survey respondents (n=41).
- Strengthen digital safety and online harm prevention for children and young people, including targeted education related to technology facilitated abuse, image-based abuse, and digital coercive control. This action was supported by 40 per cent of survey respondents (n=40).
- Greater regulation of the commercial determinants of domestic, family and sexual violence - including pornography, gambling and alcohol industries. This action was supported by 35 per cent of survey respondents (n=35).
- Develop a youth-centric prevention campaign focused on inclusion of child-centred content addressing the cycle of intergenerational violence. This action was supported by 32 per cent of survey respondents (n=32).

2. Actions under the Early Intervention pillar



There was an pervasive sense from stakeholders throughout the interviews and focus groups that the current approach to children and young people is overwhelmingly crisis orientated. Significant systemic gaps as it relates to early intervention³ mean too often children and young people reach the point of crisis before receiving any support. One Commissioner reflected “it’s not until the problems become big that people get help” (Commissioner A).

Survey respondents agreed, with numerous responses identifying the need for a greater focus on earlier opportunities to intervene and interrupt trajectories of harm experienced by children and young people. For example, two survey respondents commented:

If we are serious about ending violence against women and children, we must stop waiting for children and families to reach crisis point before offering meaningful support ... Children should not have to become visible to systems through crisis, child protection involvement or youth justice contact before receiving help. (Survey respondent)

Do not wait until children are seriously harmed, homeless, suicidal, criminalised or involved in child protection before giving them a response. Children are often expected to keep disclosing, repeat their story and prove that the risk is serious enough before support becomes available. Once violence is identified, someone should take responsibility for ensuring the child is safe, receives support and is not simply referred to another waitlist. (Survey respondent)

Throughout the consultations, significant attention was placed by stakeholders on the need to better address the barriers to help seeking among children and young people to facilitate earlier safe engagement with services and supports. In different ways, the three actions outlined in this early intervention section seek to address this challenge. Responses need to intervene before the point of crisis, be accessible, adequately funded and better meet children’s distinct needs. One survey participant succinctly summarised what early intervention should aspire to achieve:

“Ultimately, the Early Intervention Pillar should shift the focus from reacting to crises to creating the conditions in which children and families receive support early, are believed

³ Noting some stakeholders shared confusion regarding what is meant by early intervention, for clarity, under the National Plan early intervention is defined as “identifying and supporting individuals at high risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence to stop it from escalating and prevent it from reoccurring”. We use that definition here.

when they disclose harm, and can access coordinated responses that promote safety, healing and long-term wellbeing.” (Survey respondent)

A number of interview and focus group participants highlighted the current public discussion regarding youth crime and youth justice as emblematic of shortcomings as it relates to early intervention. There was a broad understanding that young people involved in the youth justice system have often been victims of violence or abuse themselves with their trauma left untreated (on this, see Fitz-Gibbon & Tyler, 2025). Related, the links between victimisation and subsequent use of violence were a common theme throughout the interview and focus groups discussions. For example, one focus group stakeholder shared:

“I think a huge gap and something we've been talking about and has been spoken about for a while is definitely more about early intervention funded programmes ... so I think there's a huge gap there to actually start working with young people who have often witnessed violence and then are recreating and replicating those behaviours.” (FG8)

Another stakeholder in the same focus group reflected:

“Early intervention, we've spoken about it. That's where the most impact will be had. You know, we support young people who are on youth justice intervention in Queensland and the vast majority of those young people have experienced violence or witnessed it... if we can intervene early and get that messaging and sort of break those cycles, then that's where our greatest impact's going to be.” (FG8)

Similar views emerged in the survey responses, with two respondents commenting:

“Children and young people experiencing violence and abuse are too often silenced, overlooked and ignored. Too often, when these children and young people don't get supported with the right type of trauma-informed mental health care early to recognise that the violence they experienced was serious, harmful and wrong - these kids fall into a cycle of perpetuating the same harmful behaviours on others as they grow older, because they didn't get the intensive support it takes to properly recover, heal, emotionally regulate, and build skills to channel challenging emotions into constructive non-violent pathways.” (Survey respondent)

“Preventing future violence starts with responding effectively to trauma in the present. The evidence is clear on the importance of early intervention, trauma-informed care, and coordinated support. Knowing that there is strong evidence base for what works keeps me hopeful; the challenge is ensuring these approaches are consistently implemented and adequately resourced.” (Survey respondent)

The focus on adequate resourcing in the final survey quote here is an important one, particularly in relation to early intervention. Recent research by Sheppard and others (2025) examined spending by pillar under National Plans between 2010 and 2023. While the focus of the authors was on spending related to violence against women, funding under the early intervention pillar was the lowest at just 3.6 per cent of total funding committed.

The following section details the actions recommended for the Second Action Plan relevant to the Early Intervention pillar.

***“The system says it cares about kids,
but it really only steps in when it’s too late.”***

(Sophie, cited in cited in StudyD)

***“It felt like the system was for adults.
Kids just had to survive however they could.”***

(Zara, cited in StudyD)

***“I believe we have a whole lot of young people out there,
like me, who are facing challenges,
but they don't really know where to seek help.
So, I feel a whole lot could be done.”***

(Scott, 18-year-old male, experienced violence from age 14, cited in StudyA)

Review and reform of parental consent laws to reduce barriers to help seeking

A key barrier to earlier intervention recognised throughout the consultation was parental consent. Parental consent laws and associated practice guidance relate to the responsibilities of the workforce to inform parents or caregivers about the response provided to children and young people seeking support.

In each interview and focus group, we asked stakeholders “If the Australian Government could include only one of the actions we have discussed today in the Second Action Plan, which would you prioritise and why? In response, a Children’s Commissioner responded:

“It would absolutely be about a policy position around consent and confidentiality for children, so that they could actually have a place that they go that they’re yeah that’s for them and that’s what all of the kids told us in that report, they couldn’t talk to their parents, didn’t know who to go to, nobody talked to them ... parents are asked whether they will receive support services that really fundamentally should have addressed the concerns for the child, and so that’s a mismatch, right? ... Children should be able to seek support for themselves, you know, through other mechanisms, and I think that there is some significant work that has to be done in relation to children’s consent, their privacy, and their ability to process the harms that are happening to them... Because you know, as a parent, if your kids are going somewhere you think you’ve got a right to know, but actually, maybe you haven’t.” (CommissionerA)

This reflected sentiment in the survey where over one-third of respondents included this action in their top five (ranked equal 5th highest out of 17 potential actions): “States and Territory governments review and reform laws to remove parental consent as a barrier for children and young people seeking help and accessing essential services.”

As one survey respondent shared “many children and young people do not disclose violence, abuse or exploitation to adults due to fear, shame, loyalty conflicts, concerns about not being believed, or uncertainty about where to seek help”. This includes concerns related to how their parents may respond particularly when one or both parents are responsible for perpetrating the abuse.

While of course the requirement for parental consent plays an important role, a number of concerns were highlighted in relation to the current application of consent laws in this context. Noting there is variation across states, the reflections of stakeholders across the consultation highlighted potential misunderstandings across the workforce in the application of parental consent noting that provisions already exist to prioritise safety above consent and perpetrators are excluded from consent requirements.

Perhaps most fundamentally, consent laws were seen as increasing barriers to help seeking for children and young people. Stakeholders commented:

“... if a person does leave their parents’ home, they face so many barriers just doing normal childhood experiences, going on a school excursion, getting to do a sporting activity that they want, getting to go rock climbing with friends and all of these things, they have to get parental consent, it’s not safe for them to get parental consent so again and again and again when they’re seeking housing, when they’re seeking healthcare, when they just want to have fun with their friends, they just come up against these barriers repeatedly.” (FG3)

“... parental consent requirements often prevent children from seeking help when they are unsafe, experiencing violence, or unable to involve a parent. Removing this barrier would

immediately expand access to counselling, health care, legal assistance and other supports, allowing children to receive help at the earliest possible stage.” (Survey respondent)

“We commonly see how services requiring parental consent is a barrier to housing, education, healthcare and support for children escaping or experiencing family violence.” (Survey respondent)

There were also examples of adults as well as young people attempting to circumvent or do their best to work within the constraints of their understanding of parental consent laws. For instance, two stakeholders said:

“We hear about from people in schools, trying to access services in school hours because then they don't have to tell you whether they come up with an excuse as to why they're seeing these people, you know, like a LGBTQI+ service, and schools will often, well, pretty much always need parental consent or consent of a guardian. And if there's any kind of issues at home, then the young person's not likely to want to ask for that consent, it just puts up a further barrier there.” (PolicyStakeholderB)

“So we wouldn't go and see the kid without consent, but we would provide really active secondary consultations around supporting that school to support that kid. So we would, so in lots of ways, we're working in spite of some of the like trying to get kids the support they need in whatever way we can make that happen.” (SectorExpertX)

There was also frustration shared regarding the double standards associated with parental consent and other aspects of our response to children and young people. For instance, stakeholders shared:

“It's not lost on me that we're talking about Gillick competency and the understanding and thought around children and young people being able to consent but yet, we're happy to lock up a 10-year-old across most states and territories in this country.” (FG3)

“if you're 14, you can go rock up to a GP, and you can consent to medical treatment without your parents because people will determine whether you're capable, you know, they'll look whether you're Gillick competent, and they'll do an assessment of that. Your parents might never know, but you cannot consent to having services or psychological services, for example, if you're experiencing family violence, because nobody asks you that.” (CommissionerA)

Related, one stakeholder pointed out that the current approach to parental consent is inconsistent with approaches that prioritise the child's voice. They explained:

“I think if we're considering the child's voice, I think a child should be allowed if they want to access that support. I've heard of school social workers where children have come to them wanting support. And of course, they have processes where they have to have the parent's permission. And if a parent says no, then they cannot offer that support or referral; there's gotta be some way. We can't just say we value children's voice and then we ignore them. I think we need to be more proactive with that.” (FG8)

Variation across the states and territories in terms of relevant law was cited as a challenge which could be addressed through a national review of parent consent laws and the adopted of a nationally consistent approach. One stakeholder suggested:

“There's also a bunch of things that if they were implemented at a national level could address some of the inconsistency, unfairness with how children and young people are treated in different states and territories. We talked about Gillick competence before, the fact that you have to explain that there's this UK case from 100 years ago where that sets

out Gillick competence is a real barrier ... having a legislated mature minor scheme that sets out that young people can make decisions for themselves, children are able to provide consent, here's what you need to be satisfied of in terms of capacity, that makes that a lot clearer from a national perspective." (FG3)

A review of parental consent laws was recommended recently in the final report of the South Australian Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (2025, at 44). Recommendation 100 set out that a parental consent review must:

"include an examination of children and young people's access to statutory and legal services, health services, homelessness services and domestic, family and sexual violence services. The review should consider the applicability of the Gillick competency test as a means to overcome these and other relevant barriers, including in circumstances where unprotective parents and guardians are restricting access to crisis and support services."

A number of stakeholders also highlighted that parents using violence against their child could withhold their consent as a further way of enacting harm. This particularly came up in the context of the family court system, although stakeholders shared it was occurring more broadly across other points of the system as well. Stakeholders commented:

"I think it becomes very difficult when there is a two-parent family and usually the mother's very proactive at wanting the children to receive counselling and to access services, but then say if the father who's most commonly the perpetrator says no, it then prevents ongoing supports to be provided for the children." (FG8)

"We do find that that person using violence is not consenting to therapy services supporting that child. And so where do we go from there? Because there has been a need identified ... I know there are some services that would only provide support to that young person or child if there is consent on both sides. And so if that person using violence is not consenting to that therapy services being in place for that young person or that child where does it all actually land and how do we actually get that specialised service for that young person or that child?" (FG7)

"Many children's experiences are not recognised or supported with appropriate services due to the parent who chooses to use violence having the ability to deny consent for help." (Survey respondent)

"There's also some legislative reform that might need to happen ... in the sense that both parents have to agree to children accessing therapeutic supports through the family court process." (FG5)

Finally, while not directly related to parental consent, stakeholders suggested a number of practical actions which could address barriers to help-seeking for children and young people, and better support young people to seek help on their own terms:

- Ensure young people fleeing family violence can obtain easy access to photo ID to avoid barriers to accessing Centrelink, Medicare, services and other supports (this follows a recent change at Australia Post which has made obtaining photo ID for young people more difficult).
- Provide safe, child-friendly and anonymous pathways that facilitate disclosures of victimisation to promote earlier identification of, and responses to violence and abuse experienced by children and young people via trusted digital platforms as well as school and community settings.

- A review of state and territory child protection practices that operate to value the voice of the parent above the voice of the child(ren), and that, in doing so, put children at increased risk of ongoing violence from parents.

Recommended Action: The Federal Government, in collaboration with states and territories, should lead a review and reform of parental consent laws to reduce barriers to children and young people accessing help.

The review should focus on laws that reduce opportunities to seek help and access services among children and young people that have experienced violence and abuse, and identifying application of parent consent laws that are not aligned with child rights, including the best interests of children and young people. As part of any law reform effort in this space, particular focus should be placed on building the capacity of the workforce to understand how laws related to parental consent should be embedded in practice including where safety should be prioritised and where the consent-giving rights of someone using violence and abuse can be excluded.

*“I was pregnant and scared
and they just said I had to bring in my mum.
She was the reason I was in that situation.”*

(Georgie, cited in StudyA)

*“After a while, you just stop expecting adults to do anything.”
(Amira, cited in StudyD)*

*“They wouldn’t tell me anything
because I didn’t have a parent there.
Like, how is that even fair?”*

(Cooper, cited in StudyA)

Review mandatory reporting laws in each state and territory

Mandatory reporting to child protection was seen by a significant number of stakeholders as a barrier to early intervention and in need of review. While some stakeholders stressed mandatory reporting plays an important role in protecting children who experience violence and abuse, there was shared recognition among stakeholders that too often it is deterring young people from seeking help and serving as a “tick box” with no other protective actions being taken by adults who receive a disclosure.

What results is that children and their families enter a statutory system that is not designed to meet their underlying needs and can enact further harm.

Youth advocates that participated in this consultation shared that they were disinclined as children to seek help from adults because of mandatory reporting. For instance, during one of our youth advocate focus groups, a participant recounted that young people are very aware of the risks associated with disclosure:

“One issue that I often came across was mandatory reporting, and I found that lots of young people would often not seek out like therapy or psychological help because they knew whatever they talked about would likely get them taken like forcibly removed from their house.” (YouthAdvocateG)

A number of Children’s Commissioner’s and researchers interviewed reflected similar sentiments detailing why mandatory reporting is seen as a barrier for children and young people when seeking to access the supports that could meet their needs and support greater safety. In a range of ways, stakeholders expressed support for an alternative approach to enable children and young people to seek help. Two commissioners explained:

“I think there’s got to be an easier way for families and communities to get support without always worrying that it’s going to go to something that’s an investigation about whether ... a parent is able to protect”. (CommissionerA)

“many, many, many kids said to me that they fear losing control if they speak up because people, trusted adults like teachers, are mandatory reporters, and then we and child protection takes what I describe as a blunt force approach. And these fears are not irrational; they’re real”. (CommissionerB)

A number of stakeholders pointed to specific examples of how these fears among children, young people as well as adults manifest including in relation to the Family Court system. There was a strong desire among stakeholders to de-couple a service response to meet children and families needs from the fears associated with the child protection system. For instance, stakeholders commented:

“We must eliminate child protection reporting as a necessary catalyst for effective action. Too many women are not coming forward to report DV because they are afraid of child protection services involvement, and the likelihood their children will be removed from their custody.” (Survey respondent)

“children and young people who want to disclose and talk about this are really afraid of what it will mean often for both parents, but particularly for the victim, victim survivor in that parental relationship, that any attempt to disclose, report, will you know end up with police, will end up with child protection.” (Sector ExpertL)

“I do think it plays into a part of the information they disclose, both mums and kids as well, because they’re scared that if they say something, it might be held up against them or it might be twisted in terms of what is reported in court. We know that the conversation sometimes what the children say and what’s brought up, it can sometimes be very different things.” (FG7)

“They’re terrified, and particularly Aboriginal women are terrified of disclosing the violence they’re living with because of the implications about poor service system responses, they do not trust the service system to respond well.” (AcademicA)

These issues related to trust were brought up in relation to different forms of violence and abuse including peer on peer sexual violence. For instance, a focus group participant shared:

“the disclosure of sexual assault issues is something that we’ve also heard from young people too. So, young people who make their first disclosure to a trusted adult and I think not necessarily understanding the mandatory reporting obligations of that adult so when that adult either reveals that information to a parent when the young person hasn’t wanted to or to someone else at the school that the young person doesn’t trust, that can basically be breach of trust and it can lead to really challenging situations when they then don’t want to take any action.” (FG3)

With the above concerns about mandatory reporting in mind, it’s no surprise that throughout the consultations frontline practitioners recounted examples of young people who had deliberately skirted around issues in terms of the information they provide to avoid triggering the need for a mandatory report. Without a full understanding of the circumstances that a young person has experienced, it is inherently more challenging to deliver a response that accurately identifies risk and addresses their underlying needs as early as possible. For instance, one stakeholder reflected:

“They would skirt around stuff to get the kind of information that they need to stay safe and to like to work on their healing. But they’ll keep a whole section of the kind of details of things outside of that therapeutic relationship ... one of our young people who’s now she may be 16 or 17, and she was like, if I could change one thing, it would be, you know, that there’d be more caveats around when something is a mandatory report or not, because I would have really liked to have been able to tell my counsellor about those things, but I couldn’t because I was worried that that would have impacts on my siblings and my and on my parents.” (SectorExpertX)

Frontline staff were also aware of the potential for breaches of trust and, as a result, the need for transparency regarding mandatory reporting which is built into initial engagement with children and their family. The need for practitioners to be better equipped to communicate decisions on mandatory reporting to the children involved emerged as a key finding in the 2023 Victorian *I believe you* study, where child victim-survivors recounted not being told that their disclosure would have to be reported and being caught unaware of and unable to plan for the subsequent implications of that disclosure (see Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023).

While of course necessary in light of the current legislative requirements, this approach often times places a greater focus on risk management than it does on enabling the young person to seek help and provide a therapeutic response that meets their needs without the fear of statutory involvement. One worker engaging directly with children and young people shared:

“And even with children, when we’re introducing services to them and talking to them about the support that we potentially will be offering all these conversations do actually come in play as well. And so no one is kind of taken aback or get quite surprised when there are serious disclosures being made and we have to actually talk them through the process of where that disclosure would actually sit. Because at the end of the day, it’s our duty of care in our work as well to actually ensure that if there is risk of harm we put in a plan in terms of risk management for those things. And part of the things that we do within the DFV context as well is to support the survivor or the victim in terms of making her understand that it’s not her decisions or choices that have brought her that risk to herself and her children.” (FG7)

There was also recognition that, too often, child protection was overly relied upon, sometimes as a first point of call, despite widespread recognition that it often fails to provide a response that adequately meets the needs of children and young people nor their families. Instead, the focus of a mandatory report tends to be on measuring and responding to risk with cases closed if they don’t meet a certain threshold. This approach, by definition and in a structured way, means a crisis is needed before a response is required. For instance, stakeholders shared:

"we say child protection failed, or the system has failed, I think we have to try and actually think a little bit differently than that, because those systems you actually don't even want them involved. You actually want the main system to be the prevention and early intervention system, so that that system is a place that people actually seek help from and can get it, but you know the waitlists are terrible, and there's so much process and administration." (CommissionerA)

"I think maybe more of a collaborative approach ... You know, she discloses to us and then we make the report and then child safety does their intervention and then they say, okay, it's closed. Maybe she should go speak to this person and then she gets some support and that's closed. And none of those systems are talking to each other. And now she's just jumping around, still feeling really lost and going through everything while still trying to be there for her kids. If there was a more central point where, you know, she comes and that report's made, the support's provided in the same space, Where they feel a little bit more supported and like it's not going to be twisted in the wrong way, if that makes sense." (FG7)

"Early intervention should not mean identifying risk and then placing the child on another waitlist. It should mean that someone takes responsibility, stays involved and makes sure support is actually received." (Survey respondent)

"Intensive Family Support Services (IFSS) in the child protection context are supposed to act as early intervention services. However, my research shows that greater investment in IFSS actually increases the number of children and families entering child protection systems for the first time. It may be that IFSS are simply occurring too late relative to the risk trajectory of these families, or that there's not enough of these services to meet the ever growing demand. Either way, these services appear to be acting as a pipeline towards statutory involvement rather than mitigating it. This needs much more investigation as we simply cannot have services that are supposed to sit outside of the statutory system, funneling families in and painting parents as "risky" when they've not had the opportunity to receive support beforehand." (Survey respondent)

Although challenges in the current operation of mandatory reporting laws were readily identified by stakeholders throughout the consultations, there were limited suggestions as to the specific changes needed to address them and create a more effective response for children that balances children's safety, risks and needs. Bringing together concerns regarding help seeking and breaches of trust, one researcher put forward a specific proposal:

"I think that for over 13 year olds we should absolutely stop mandatory reporting. That doesn't mean to say that children should never be referred to child protection or other statutory services, including police, but ... nothing closes down help seeking more for children and young people than the belief that whatever they do won't be held private. There's got to be a period of confidentiality. Most of what children report will not meet the threshold, particularly when they're adolescents. Won't meet the threshold for a child protection response. So that absolutely is so negative in terms of closing down help seeking, and that we need to be calling it out to say actually children and young people have to have some agency. Now we may not always like that agency ... but it's not helpful to have people that they're confiding in seen by young people to inverted commas, betray their trust, and so I think that we've gone down a poor route here. Children and young people are telling us over and over again that they want to be able to have confidential conversations, and you know that leaves sometimes the professional holding the risk, but similarly they're still left holding the risk because no one picks it up anyway when they're referred, and there's been a betrayal of trust and you close down help seeking." (AcademicA)

Another stakeholder identified a number of things that could be considered as part of a review of mandatory reporting laws:

I think that while I recognise mandatory, like the value of people providing concerns about kids to the statutory system is important in certain cases But then, what's the threshold of when there's a specialist service involved and we can support someone? There's a safe parent, there, you know, a protective parent, there's other things. When would it be okay to either delay or to triage or to say we've got we've got this in hand, don't get involved."
(SectorExpertX)

Practically, and reflecting on the realities of an overwhelmed child protection system that closes many of the reports received with little action taken, stakeholders also suggested that there should be a requirement to facilitate a referral to a needs-based support for the children involved in any disclosure prior to case closure. One stakeholder suggested:

"(We need) a guaranteed early support offer after disclosure, not just a referral. This should include follow-up, safety planning, practical support and confirmation that the child has actually connected with a service." (Survey respondent)

This approach would embed a proactive referral point into the child protection process with the aim of facilitating help-seeking and access to services for the children involved, where safe and appropriate to do so.

Recommended Action: The Federal Government, in collaboration with states and territories, lead a review of mandatory reporting laws. The focus should be on balancing child safety with legislation that does not deter help seeking and early intervention.

As part of law reform, noting the possibility that disclosures are likely to increase, particular focus should be placed on investment and building awareness of non-statutory responses that can be provided following disclosure which are orientated towards meeting the needs of children and their families (as against an orientation toward managing risk).

"Trying to get help without a parent was impossible.

You're not treated seriously."

(Dylan, cited in StudyD)

***"When you're a teenager alone,
no one knows what to do with you.***

You fall through every crack."

(Jayden, cited in StudyD)

Earlier non-statutory interventions which reflect an understanding of and seek to address experiences of victimisation among boys

While a number of gaps were identified as it relates to early intervention, a recurring theme among stakeholders was the need to better recognise and respond to victimisation among boys. Throughout the consultation, we frequently heard that adolescent boys in particular were viewed as (potential) perpetrators first with little to no acknowledgement of their victimisation. This relates to both the public discourse related to domestic, family and sexual violence as well as how boys are engaged at different points of the service system. While not seeking to counter the gendered nature of domestic, family and sexual violence, several stakeholders shared that the application of a gendered lens across the issue meant that boys own experiences of violence and abuse are often invisible in policy and practice:

"Sometimes the whole gendered issue ... sort of pretends that boys are not living with domestic violence. You know, I think that's just appalling. You know, that actually equal numbers of girls and boys are living with domestic violence ... so I think that boys can be privileged, but they can also be more victimised ... particularly when you look at sexual abuse, that girls are more likely to be the subject of sexual abuse, but not only, and a lot of these boys are being sexually abused." (AcademicA)

"When we talk about men's violence I think we also need to also talk about it's men's violence against men and men's violence against boys." (FG4)

Building on this, other stakeholders noted that when boys do come to the attention of the system it is with questions of their own use of violence front of mind for the responding practitioner. The need to shift practice away from the adoption of a perpetrator first lens when responding to boys was noted by numerous stakeholders in the interviews and focus groups:

And then I would come to boys ... I think there have been some good initiatives come through for young people using violence. But that is still a fairly linear and negative lens on how the how they are greeted, if you like, by the service system. So we're not seeing the opportunity to engage meaningfully in and recovery services first and foremost, that may then drive or lead to, if unserved, violence like patterns of violence and problematic behaviour in that respect." (SectorExpertL)

"We do have older boys, we're always getting asked the questions about their behaviour off the bat, so it's already kind of assumed that they are going to be or are perpetrators of violence ... And that's already kind of setting up a, I guess, a precedent when they go to this next place that there's that judgement of, you know, your children are now likely to be perpetrators or, you know, they're viewed a certain way, which is obviously, not really helpful if we're wanting people to access supports." (FG7)

"If we can give kids access to therapeutic support when they're younger, as close to the time that they experienced child sexual abuse, then ... we've had that opportunity to intervene early to provide the support and healing that's needed so that they don't go on to use violence, or that we reduce the likelihood that they're going to go on to use violence." (SectorExpertX)

While not deterministic, given the increasing understanding of the links between prior victimisation and perpetration, early intervention with boys who have been victims would result in prevention of violence. As one survey respondent commented:

One of the most powerful ways we can prevent violence is by ensuring we identify and address the needs of children impacted by DFSV today, so that they do not become tomorrow's victims and perpetrators. (Survey respondent)

Effective earlier intervention with boys who have experienced violence and abuse would seek to avoid subsequent youth justice involvement, adolescent family violence in the home as well as prevention of child on child abuse and adult perpetrated intimate partner violence.

Stakeholders noted that there are numerous missed opportunities across the system to facilitate early intervention for boys, and that too often signs of prior victimisation are missed and responses are delayed until the young person acts out and uses violence themselves. Stakeholders commented:

"And then young boys in particular who end up using violence ... but have been for years, victims of family violence and just said, "No one raised any concerns about me when I was sitting there, watching maybe my mum getting strangled and I'm sitting there, watching harms to a parent or to siblings but now the second I start responding, my behaviours are using violence, I'm getting referred off to some behaviour change program and I'm being finally addressed by police and other services but not the services that you want to be speaking to." (FG2)

"we need to remember that there is a window of opportunity and window of vulnerability when they are young people. So I really would like to see maybe more services being funded for young people, especially young males, in a sense that there is some very strong opportunities there to break cycles. In our space, we see so many, we hear so much from the adults how sometimes the trauma made them, they didn't reach for support, no one believed in them and how things escalated." (FG8)

"What I would like is a lifespan approach to gender based violence and an intergenerational approach to gender based violence, because child sexual abuse is a very good way to transmit trauma intergenerationally ... If you've got a really traumatised mum and a really traumatised dad, and then they haven't been supported to recover, and then they're raising their kids, there are a couple of ways in which trauma gets transmitted intergenerationally, not always, but one is through domestic violence, and then when there's DV in the home, the risk that one of the teenage boys starts sexually abusing his sister or sexually assaulting his girlfriend." (AcademicB)

"I think we're now starting to have really helpful, meaningful conversations around holding the childhood of the adults that we work with in mind. And particularly around service design. Which I think is really important for those individuals because it keeps children safe. But also I think because it honours children who are living through these circumstances that we can now trace into perpetration of violence later and really gives us opportunities to effectively and ethically intervene early for those children." (FG4)

While recent efforts by the Federal Government such as the Supporting Adolescent Boys trial were acknowledged by several stakeholders as important progress, there was broad agreement that there are significant gaps as it relates to early intervention. This particularly related to the middle years – between ages 5 and 12 years old, as one stakeholder explained:

"0 to 5, there will be something. From 5 to 12, there will be nothing. And then from 12 up, there will be a lot. You see that there will be youth justice programs ... what happens in that 5 to 12 is where I feel we really, there's a lot of gaps between that 5 to 12 age where I find that majority of times if we're actually having children and young people that are experiencing domestic and family violence, that's where we see a lot of disengagement with school. That's where we see a lot of behaviours that sometimes we do know, because we've worked in this industry for a while, we know that those are the signs and symptoms of

trauma from the domestic and family violence, but somehow those can actually be diagnosed as ADHD and all these other things that children presenting to paediatricians. or presenting to child development services will get those labels and all that ... Kids are refusing to go to school. Young people are now doing all these, engaging in antisocial behaviours and all that. And we have all these youth programs that would actually be around having to either get them back in community or they have all these other youth programmes that they will be attending to, which will be somehow on the end of that whole justice thing, when the youth justice is getting involved with them, then we actually, I feel we're leaving it for too late to actually get to it.” (FG7)

There was also interest in pilots which continue to build the evidence base in rigorous ways that other states and territories could learn and adapt from. For instance, one academic interviewed recommended:

“it would be great to see more piloting. So rather than like we're going to commit to a \$20 billion uplift over 10 years, like we are going to invest strategically in a particular geography or a particular space. Let's pilot and evaluate and see what happens. Like that's what Vic Health used to do, you know, they would sort of pilot and evaluate. So I wonder about the potential for the Commonwealth to work with states and territories to say we don't have all the answers, and I think in this space we sometimes make a mistake because we're like, oh, let's just do a systematic lit review, and it's like we don't know what works, like we need to build the evidence. So I wonder in this space about identifying like two or three potential avenues, piloting, evaluating, and then you've got the evidence base to scale up.” (AcademicB)

There were a number of specific suggestions regarding opportunities to strengthen early intervention with adolescent boys specifically. The recurring theme was the importance of non-statutory engagement across a variety of offerings that are both accessible and engaging. Several stakeholders lamented the decline of “third spaces” where young people could spend time and build trusting relationships with adults who could support them. For instance, stakeholders reflected:

“Yeah, I think for boys who are starting to show problematic behaviours we see that onset particularly in their early teens, but sometimes younger, you know that is a whole area of intervention that Australia needs to think carefully about because at the moment they're in youth justice, where we just make things worse .. I do see it as sort of often a health intervention that that we're missing ... Communicare in Perth set up like almost like a drop-in facility for kids that are living in domestic violence. So it hasn't reached the threshold where the child's going to be removed, like there's ongoing violence in the home, but mum and dad are still together, and it's actually a drop-in facility for the child ... that idea of a place where the kid can just check in ... how do we like have eyes on that kid and support that kid to be reflective and cope and emotionally regulate, but without child removal. So yeah, there's sort of like a stratum of, stratum of intervention for young people, that yeah, I'm just interested in how we diversify service offerings, make it accessible, make it appealing, make it non-statutory, and that's always an issue in the child protection space is so many interventions are governed by risk frameworks because the you know the service is under and the professionals are really nervous about the statutory threshold and the point at which they need to notify to child protection.” (AcademicB)

“They can't sleep there necessarily but they can come in, they can get a drink, they might be able to get a feed, they might have a yarn to the admin staff or the youth workers or peer workers ... that very much really important notion of those staff that help break down the barriers and stigma of seeking help. So, I think having some spaces for young people to be able to come in, to feel welcome, to build relationship, all of us that have worked in services will know the importance of the front of house staff, admin, reception, whatever they may be. They become attachment figures for young people and safe places and spaces

for them to come in and feel welcome when they might not feel welcome in lots of other places.” (FG3)

“... it's like a safe haven for children, young people, especially those who are experiencing pretty traumatic situations in the home ... these like third spaces in the community should be made available for children and young people, the barriers to entry should be non-existent. Things like accessibility in terms of opening hours, in terms of who's staffing the program, in terms of how long children and young people can access the program for, if they need a referral, if they need any consents from guardians or parents, if it's close to transport, like all of these factors should be considered.” (YouthAdvocateC)

Significant emphasis was also placed on the relational nature of the use of violence among young people and the importance of family work. While these programs are needed among all genders, there was a recognition that violence among adolescent boys was generally more severe and was more likely to transition into young adulthood (on this, see also Campbell et al., 2020). Stakeholders noted that remains significant variation in service provision for adolescents using violence in the home across the country as well as long wait-lists where those services do exist. Stakeholders commented:

“And so I do know that with the young boys that (have experienced violence and) are now choosing to use violence in the home, especially with the adult caregiver, there is a specific program. I think it was a Renew programme. I don't know whether it's still in existence or so, but is just for male young people that were using abuse towards their primary caregiver. So in most cases, it will be the mum. Those programs, I think, have quite a lengthy wait list. And so from when we referring to when they get a bit of, I guess, assessment being done and the programme accepting them, that can actually change the course of change for that young person. And that whole attachment process as well may be more fractured in that waiting period.” (FG7)

“One thing I would do is embed programs into schools that develop skills and attributes and dispositions that better equip children and adolescents with relationship skills, and there have been some steps forward recently in this domain in relation to consent education and respectful relationships, and I see this as a glimmer of hope, but I think we really need to build that preventative program. To me, if we're thinking about the infliction of violence against kids, and also the infliction of violence against intimate partners, obviously, there's a whole range of reasons at various meta, mesa, and micro levels that go towards that, but programs that help develop skills in attitudes and behaviors and conflict resolution; those types of core skills, I think, are key. And the fact is that so many kids don't get those types of skills and attitudes developed at home by their parents, and a big reason for that is that many of those parents, even if they could and wanted to, either aren't able to for some reason, but also many parents are themselves obviously perpetrators of violence against their kids, so they're actually modelling the wrong things, so I think school programs are essential.” (AcademicD)

There was also some scepticism about the efficacy of some current approaches to working with boys and young men. This in part reflects increasing diversity of approaches to working with men and boys. For instance, stakeholders said:

“I think we need to detangle it (violence prevention work) from men's health and probably need to explicitly say that. You know, men getting ripped and ready is not tackling family violence ... it gets all rolled into one big strategy sometimes, that if men have better mental health - and do more exercise and get bigger, then they won't hit their wives. It gets really - it needs to be detangled and understood and connected to an evidence base.” (FG4)

“I think we need to do a lot more with teenage boys that connects with the desire of boys to feel like they're in control, and they are the ones making choices. There's a mastery issue

here for boys and men, where we want to feel like we're on top of things. We like we're just getting advice or we're getting information, but boys and men don't want to feel like they're engaged in help seeking. And I think we can play to those strengths in terms of meeting teenage boys where they're at, giving them resources to help or opportunities to make good decisions, rather than I think, yeah, you know I think with good intentions, but I think the deficit framing around teenage boys around masculinity, I mean, we need to stop talking to teenage boys about masculinity ... this framing has been a major cause of what we in other contexts we call iatrogenic harm. We've actually disenfranchised the cohort that we most want to engage. So, how do we play to their strengths?" (AcademicB)

Finally, reflecting an increasing appreciation for a lifecycle approach to violence prevention, there was also recognition of the need to intervene early with at-risk fathers. This could include, for instance, a focus on fathers who have been involved with the child protection system themselves. Stakeholders shared:

"I think you have to prioritise funding early in the life course, so around infants. You know that actually, if violence is happening during pregnancy, you know, and a lot of it doesn't, but some of it does. So that if you're picking up, that men, overall fathers who are responding to violence during pregnancy, or using domestic violence with women in a range of coercive ways when they're pregnant, you know these mothers and children are highly, highly at risk, and we do know that if you get in early there, then downstream, you don't get the compounding effects of the violence against children. So I think that if I was to prioritise anything, I'd say we've got to get in earlier with many more early intervention programs and tertiary intervention programs, you know, like wards with babies and infants, and potentially that's where you also get in with fathers. A lot of these men don't want to repeat the fathering patterns that they grew up with, but they don't know how to do something different, but these are the most at risk in terms of their long-term trajectory." (Academic A)

"I think the other area of practice that's easier said than done, but it's it's it's early intervention with at-risk families, particularly dads, to sort of say like how you know what did you think of your father? Do you want to be a different sort of father? What would that look like? Especially with their first kid, like getting in with like the first kid, and and an intervention that is invitational, that's not again, it's not statutory, and that's where the community, you know, that's where the community controlled element comes in. But I mean, outside of work with Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander families, like how do we facilitate that kind of family support? That's really getting in early with dads and getting into like infancy care. Yeah, that that's that's where I see a lot of promise and a lot less potential for sort of backlash, you know how be the dad you want to be. You know, did you like your dad? No, he was shit. How was he shit? Oh, he beat you up. Okay, do you want to beat your kids up, or you don't? Okay, well, let's talk about that. You know, not that simple." (AcademicB)

Fatherhood is increasingly recognised as both a point of risk but also a time of intervention opportunity in relation to men's use of domestic and family violence (see, among others, Humphreys et al., 2019; Meyer, 2018; Whittaker et al., 2021). While in the response system men's behaviour change programs, including Caring Dads, have sought to address men's role as fathers to increase motivation to change their abusive behaviours, there is significantly less attention on addressing risk early at the transition into fatherhood. This was viewed as an under-explored opportunity for early intervention work by several stakeholders interviewed and an opportunity for greater investment, including by embedding domestic and family violence specialist workers in early childhood settings including playgroups, to support earlier risk identification and referred access to relevant support services.

Recommended Action: The Federal Government increase investment in non-statutory programs which reflects an understanding of and seeks to address experiences of victimisation among boys.

This could include:

- drop-in centres that are accessible and engaging where young people can build trusted relationships with adults who are equipped to meet their needs.
- programs that build practical skills among adolescents that may be adversely impacted by their own victimisation which includes work in schools and other community settings as well as engaging young people's families as part of strengthening relationships skills.
- engaging at-risk fathers (including those who have been victims of violence as children) during pregnancy and following birth of their first child.

***"You know, a little boy of 13 here,
something like that happened ... you will be scared ...***

You don't even know who to turn to.

You don't even know who you report to."

(Ben, 17-year-old male, experienced violence from age 10, cited in StudyA)

***"Who is going to believe what I said? Because I'm young,
they might not really believe what I'm telling them and all of that.***

So, I was kind of scared of reporting."

(Oliver, cited in StudyA)

Other early intervention related actions that were broadly supported through the focus groups and interviews:

- Reflecting increasing understandings of the impacts of harmful pornography, AI Chatbots and the early onset of boys accessing child exploitation material, more intensive supports to address sexual disorders and dysregulation should be developed and delivered.
- Increased investment in the development and delivery of awareness raising initiatives among children and young people about different forms of domestic, family and sexual violence experienced by children, with the aim of better equipping them to recognise risk earlier and to support greater help-seeking.
- Reflecting the reduction in funding for family-based interventions, where it is safe to do so, early intervention programs should incorporate a focus on working with families and caregivers alongside delivery of the program with the young people. At all times, the distinct risks and needs of the young person should be centred.
- Greater investment in peer mentorship initiatives which aim to equip young people with the capacity to provide support and also challenge harmful attitudes or behaviours among their peers.

Other early intervention related actions that were broadly supported through the survey responses:

- Embed trauma-informed early intervention responses in youth justice and diversion programs in recognition of the strong overlap between experiences of child victimisation, trauma and justice system involvement. This action was supported by 47 per cent of survey respondents (n=41).
- Develop specialist early intervention responses for children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviours or at risk of offending. This action was supported by 38 per cent of survey respondents (n=33).
- Develop and deliver evidence-based early intervention programs that equip adolescent boys with the motivation, confidence and practical skills needed to safely and effectively challenge unsafe, sexist or disrespectful behaviours among their peers. This action was supported by 38 per cent of survey respondents (n=33).
- Embed holistic wellbeing supports within educational settings, including counsellors, social workers, speech pathologists and occupational therapists, to strengthen early identification of risk and provision of early supports. This action was supported by 36 per cent of survey respondents (n=32).
- Expand investment in programs, such as Targeted Early Intervention, that provide intensive wrap-around supports to families who are known to the child protection system. This action was supported by 35 per cent of survey respondents (n=31).
- Develop and embed child-inclusive domestic and family violence risk assessment and management practices, including safety planning, across universal services. This action was supported by 35 per cent of survey respondents (n=31).
- Improve coordinated responses to children at risk by strengthening information sharing between child protection, family violence, police, health and family law systems. This action was supported by 33 per cent of survey respondents (n=29).
- Strengthen parents' and caregivers' capability to recognise early indicators of domestic, family and sexual violence and respond safely to children's disclosures and help-seeking. This action was supported by 32 per cent of survey respondents (n=28).

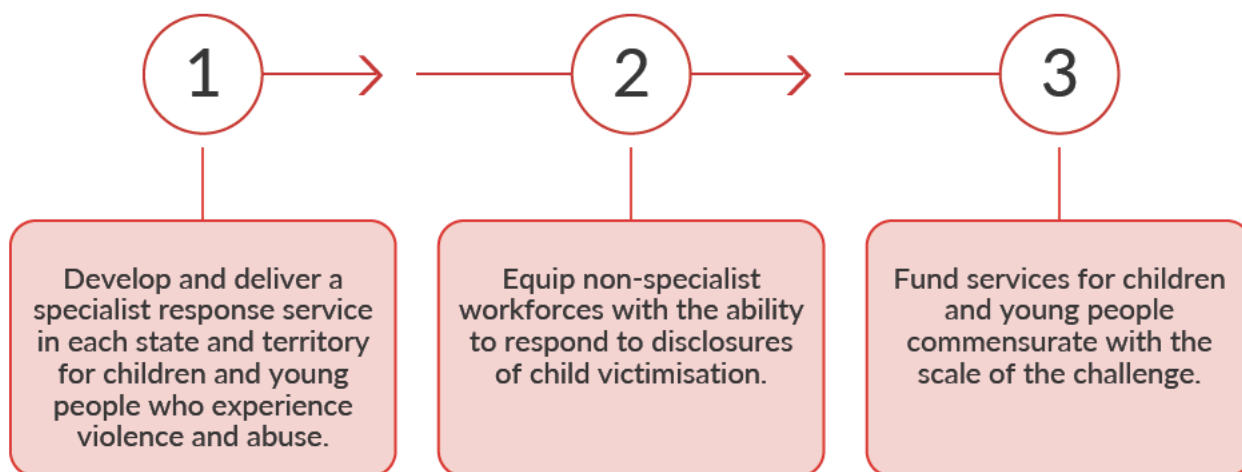
***“Primary school that would have been, I reckon, the spot to get me,
because I remembered everything.***

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.”***

(Felicity, cited in StudyC)

3. Actions under the Response pillar



The National Plan recognises that responding effectively to domestic, family and sexual violence requires more than crisis intervention alone. The Response pillar seeks to ensure that victim-survivors can access timely, coordinated and trauma-informed support that promotes safety and reduces the risk of further harm. The consultations leading up to the 2022 National Plan (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022a, 2022b), and the actions included under the First Action Plan, recognise that delivering an effective response system requires strengthening specialist services, improving coordination across systems, enhancing workforce capability and ensuring that victim-survivors can access the right support at the right time, regardless of where they first seek help.

Specific to children and young people who experience violence and abuse, the consultation highlighted that achieving these objectives requires responses that not only recognise them as victim-survivors in their own right, but are child-centred, accessible for young people, and developmentally appropriate. While stakeholders consistently acknowledged the significant progress that has been made in recent years in recognising children's experiences of violence within policy and public discourse, they also described a persistent gap between recognition and implementation. Across the interviews, focus groups and survey responses, stakeholders repeatedly observed that specialist services for children remain limited, workforce capability is inconsistent, and investment has not kept pace with either the prevalence or complexity of children's experiences of violence and abuse. Frontline organisations consistently argued that the current response system remains largely designed around adult victim-survivors, with children frequently receiving support through an adult lens, or only indirectly through services provided to their protective parent/caregiver.

The consultation findings also reinforce that responding effectively to child victimisation cannot be the responsibility of specialist domestic and family violence services alone. Research has found that children and young people disclose experiences of violence and abuse across a wide range of settings, including schools, early childhood education, health services, youth services and community organisations, and often seek support from trusted adults and peers. This means that an effective response system must combine specialist child-centred services with a broader mainstream workforce that is equipped to recognise abuse, respond safely to disclosures and facilitate timely access to specialist support. As one survey respondent observed:

"All organisations working with young people should have the capability to respond safely, provide appropriate support, and connect them with specialist services. This requires investment in workforce capability, clear referral pathways and stronger collaboration between education providers, health services and the specialist family violence sector."
(Survey respondent)

Taken together, the consultation findings point to the need for a response system that is genuinely child-centred, adequately resourced and nationally consistent. The recommended actions that follow focus on strengthening Australia's response through investment commensurate with the scale of children's victimisation, establishing specialist services for children and young people in every jurisdiction, equipping mainstream workforces to respond effectively to disclosures, and improving the coordination, accessibility and quality of responses across the service system.

The following section details the actions recommended for the Second Action Plan relevant to the Response pillar.

Develop and deliver a specialist response service in each state and territory for children and young people who experience violence and abuse.

Across the consultations, stakeholders consistently identified the absence of specialist domestic, family and sexual violence services for children and young people as one of the most significant gaps in Australia's current response system. While recognition of children as victim-survivors in their own right has increased considerably in recent years, stakeholders emphasised that this policy shift has not been matched by sustained investment in specialist, child-centred services designed to meet children's distinct safety, recovery and therapeutic needs. As a result, many children continue to rely on adult-focused services or fragmented responses across child protection, mental health, education and justice systems. As numerous stakeholders in the interviews and focus groups remarked:

"We need to talk about specialist trauma responses because they are so few and far between." (SectorExpertE)

"There needs to be more children targeted services ... "They have nowhere to go that's safe for them, and they have no one to tell." (CommissionerF)

"There is more recognition of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right... but I don't think we're anywhere near what we had hoped to see in terms of availability and accessibility of child-centred support services." (FG5)

"Even from a policy point of view, a lot of recommendations just can't even be implemented because we don't necessarily have the service system that we need to respond to and support young people after violence and abuse." (AcademicB)

Stakeholders consistently argued that children and young people require dedicated specialist responses that recognise their developmental stage, support recovery from trauma, and coordinate assistance across the multiple systems they commonly engage with. The need for this was well captured in the remarks made by one Commissioner:

"Not many services for children... they'll often say when we talk to them, 'There's nothing for us, it doesn't look like it's for us, it's not open over the hours we need it, people don't understand us or understand who we are and what we need.'" (CommissionerG)

Building on this, stakeholders noted that specialist responses should not simply adapt existing adult services. Rather, they should be designed from the outset for children and young people, providing welcoming, developmentally appropriate environments where young people feel safe, understood and able to seek help in their own right. Likewise, another stakeholder commented:

"Whatever the specialist response is, it has to be child focused. Child centred. It's got to have an understanding of children's development... informed by trauma... evidence-informed... and understand those intersecting factors." (SectorExpertQ)

The reference here to the importance of a 'child-centred' response is an important one, and aligns with findings from the synthesis report produced by ANROWS on actions to improve children's safety (Gillfeather-Spetere & Watson, 2024). In this report, the work of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2021) is cited, which outlines three design principles for child-centred policy and practices, to:

- Support responsive relationships for children and adults,
- Strengthen core skills for planning, adapting and achieving goals, and
- Reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families.

The Center's (2021) work helpfully sets out the changes needed in policy and system approaches to embed these principles into programs and practice.

Rather than expecting services to adapt adult models of support retrospectively to the needs of young victim-survivors, stakeholders described the need for services designed specifically for children and young people that provide therapeutic interventions, risk assessment and safety planning, family support, advocacy, and coordinated referral pathways. The value of this was captured in comments made by a frontline practitioner:

"Creating very trauma-informed spaces for children... role modelling children being clients in their own rights. Having workers assigned to actually have that moment with the child to understand their needs and not just be something that is a plus of mum." (SectorExpertAW)

Throughout the consultation, there was a commonly shared view that any specialist service response should function as more than a standalone single service or therapeutic program. Rather, in each state and territory, specialist services should provide coordination across the systems children commonly navigate, including health, education, child protection, justice and specialist family violence services. Stakeholders believed that specialist coordination would reduce fragmentation, minimise the need for children to repeat disclosures, and better ensure that children receive timely, coordinated and developmentally appropriate support.

There was also an identified need for the design of the specialist service response to be adapted to the specific context of the geographical areas within which it is delivered. Reflecting increasing awareness of the importance of place-based interventions, stakeholders noted the need for the design of specialist services to support contextual needs of children and young people. For example, specialist services should reflect the distinct risks and needs of young people who experience violence and abuse in border communities, and access challenges in remote communities.

One in three survey respondents (33 per cent, n=27), identified the need to establish a dedicated specialist domestic and family violence service for children and young people in each state and territory as one of the priority actions they would like to see included under the response pillar in the Second Action Plan. Respondents consistently described these services as the missing component of Australia's family violence service system and emphasised the need for nationally consistent access regardless of where children and young people live. One survey respondent commented:

"While many services support adult victim-survivors, children are often supported indirectly through their parent or caregiver. Dedicated specialist family violence services for children and young people would ensure they receive developmentally appropriate risk assessment, safety planning, therapeutic support, advocacy and recovery services tailored to their unique experiences and needs. This action would strengthen recognition of children as victim-survivors in their own right and provide a clear service pathway for those impacted by violence." (Survey respondent)

Mirroring this view, other survey respondents also commented:

"This service would be essential providing the care and support children require with DFV." (Survey respondent)

"I wholeheartedly support a specialist family violence centre model for children and young people as it is critically needed." (Survey respondent)

"Children and young people continue to experience significant barriers accessing specialist support in their own right. While many services support adult victim-survivors, children are often supported indirectly through their parent or carer..." (Survey respondent)

"There are few services that specifically work in treating trauma related to family violence for children and young people." (Survey respondent)

I wholeheartedly support a specialist family violence centre model for children and young people as it is critically needed." (Survey respondent)

"Having dedicated service responses will be the most assured way to get children's needs seen and met." (Survey respondent)

"This service would be essential providing the care and support children require with DFV." (Survey respondent)

While stakeholders described this as a significant gap nationally, there are emerging examples of promising practice and state-based funding to support child-centred response workers and the piloting of therapeutic services for children and young people. For example, in May 2025 the Western Australian Government announced funding from three pilot therapeutic services for children and young people, including two Healing Services, and the development of a centralised web-based and telehealth service for children and young people affected by family and domestic violence (see further Stojkovski, 2025).

Numerous survey respondents emphasised that a specialist service must respond not only to children and young people who have experienced violence, but also to children and young people who are using violence within their families or intimate partner relationships. Rather than viewing these as separate cohorts, stakeholders described the need for integrated therapeutic responses that recognise many young people using violence have extensive histories of victimisation themselves. One survey respondent explained:

"Recognising children as victim-survivors in their own right, not merely bystanders to adult violence, is foundational to everything else in the response pillar. Without it, response systems default to treating children as evidence sources or collateral rather than people with their own safety and recovery needs. Second, the current response to children who use violence is largely reactive and justice-oriented rather than therapeutic. Many of these young people have significant histories of prior victimisation and child protection involvement well before their own behaviour escalates, so a therapeutic and diversionary response reduces the risk of simply cycling harm rather than addressing it." (Survey respondent)

This call reflected a shared recognition among many survey respondents that children using violence are more often than not victim-survivors first and foremost. In comments through the survey, respondents noted:

"Children who are using violence are often children who have experienced violence themselves." (Survey respondent)

"Responses need to recognise that children using violence are frequently victim-survivors themselves and require therapeutic rather than punitive responses." (Survey respondent)

"Young people who use violence are often communicating trauma, fear and unmet need. They require specialised therapeutic responses." (Survey respondent)

Similar sentiment emerged through the focus groups. For example, one stakeholder explained:

"We routinely see young people... who first come to the attention of the system as a young person who's using violence and it's immediately evident that actually, there's a significant and complex picture of current victimisation as well." (FG2)

These views are consistent with evidence from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study, which found that experiences of childhood maltreatment are strongly associated with later use of violence as well as findings from the Adolescent Family Violence in Australia study (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022a). Young people who have experienced multiple forms of abuse, neglect and exposure to domestic violence are significantly more likely to use violence themselves. Further, Australia's first child sexual abuse perpetration prevalence study found adult men who reported being sexual abused as a child were far more likely to report offending against a child (Salter et al., 2023).

Reflecting this, numerous survey respondents noted the need to better recognise that children's own use of violence is often a trauma-based response, and should be viewed through a developmental lens.

Survey respondents repeatedly noted that children and young people who use violence should not be responded to through adult perpetrator frameworks and via adult services. As one sector stakeholder commented:

"Often, we are responding to young people who are using violence with the same level of perpetrator lens of what we would respond to an adult to." (FG5)

There was a recognised need to address trauma and provide therapeutic intervention, promote accountability alongside healing, involve family-based interventions and avoid criminalisation, wherever possible.

Taken together, the survey, interviews and focus groups highlighted the need for a specialist response that moves beyond binary understandings of children as either victims or users of violence. Instead, specialist services in each state and territory should be designed to recognise the complex overlap between children's experiences of victimisation and their own use of violence, delivering developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed interventions that promote safety, accountability and long-term healing.

Recommended Action: Develop and deliver specialist response services for children and young people who experience violence and abuse in every state and territory.

The Australian Government should work with states and territories to establish and sustainably fund specialist services for children and young people who experience violence and abuse in every jurisdiction ensuring access in regional and rural areas. These services should provide developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed responses for children and young people, including specialist therapeutic responses for children and young people who are using, or at risk of using violence. Services should support safety, recovery and healing through multidisciplinary child centred care, coordinated referral pathways, family-centred practice where appropriate, and where needed, access to developmentally appropriate harmful sexual behaviour interventions.

“For me personally, I’d struggled [to find a service] ...

it wasn’t there in my face ...

it was hard for me ...

*I didn’t really know of any solely family violence or domestic violence support
services ... anything that I could reach out to ...
I wish they were more accessible and more visible.”*

(Amy, cited in StudyD)

Every single person that works with children...

they all need to have some kind of training in being trauma informed.

I have noticed that a lot of them – especially police ...

*they are disconnected a lot of the time with what they are saying and how it
might impact a person who has an experience of trauma.*

(Sarah, 17-year-old female, experienced violence from age three, cited in StudyA)

Equip non-specialist workforces with the ability to respond to disclosures of child victimisation.

Recent research with child victim-survivors of violence and abuse has consistently found that when children disclose experiences of violence, the trusted adults in their lives, including teachers, school wellbeing staff, school counsellors and other frontline professionals, often do not have the knowledge, confidence or organisational support required to respond effectively (Fitz-Gibbon, 2025; Fitz-Gibbon & Meyer, 2023; Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023a). Rather than feeling believed, supported and connected to specialist assistance, throughout recent interview-based studies, child victim-survivors have described responses that minimised, excused or denied their experiences of victimisation, delayed access to support or left them uncertain about what would happen next following the initial disclosure.

These findings were strongly reinforced throughout the consultation. Stakeholders consistently recognised that children and young people most often disclose experiences of violence to trusted adults they already know, rather than to specialist domestic and family violence services, and that these disclosures should be met with belief, validation and a response that supports safety. There was recognition that poor initial responses to disclosures may delay future help-seeking and increase the risk of ongoing harm. Stakeholders acknowledged that achieving this means that teachers, early childhood educators, school wellbeing staff, health practitioners, youth workers and other professionals working in universal services frequently become children's first point of disclosure and first opportunity for intervention.

Stakeholders often emphasised that improving responses to child victimisation requires capability building well beyond the specialist domestic and family violence workforce. As one stakeholder explained:

"I think particularly what stands out for me is really just around disclosure... there's a lot of work to be making sure that the services that are available when families or individuals disclose family violence are there for them and they're appropriate, but I think it's an opportunity to really consider disclosure and what that means... helping people understand the impacts of disclosure better as well." (SectorExpertB)

Mirroring this view, two survey respondents described:

Young people often disclose abuse at different stages of their lives, including after they have left home. All organisations working with young people should have the capability to respond safely, provide appropriate support, and connect them with specialist services. This requires investment in workforce capability, clear referral pathways and stronger collaboration between education providers, health services and the specialist family violence sector. (Survey respondent)

"I would like to see a stronger emphasis on ensuring that responses to children and young people who have experienced violence are consistent, trauma-informed and coordinated across all settings..." (Survey respondent)

In terms of the range of services that needs to be equipped to respond safely and effectively to children's disclosures of violence there was also recognition that this may vary across communities and cohorts. For example, speaking specifically to the help-seeking experiences of migrant and refugee children and young people, one stakeholder commented:

"The first touchpoint is usually different for disclosure for children, young people from refugee and migrant background. It's not necessarily a mainstream family violence service or specific services. It's usually the settlement caseworker or school... it's quite different and diverse." (SectorExpertA)

Stakeholders more commonly identified a lack of confidence, training and organisational support as impeding effective and meaningful responses to young victims' disclosures of harm. Across the interviews and focus groups, there was widespread recognition that many professionals are uncertain about how to respond when a child discloses violence, including how to communicate with children in trauma-informed ways, undertake immediate safety planning, navigate mandatory reporting obligations (where relevant), and connect children and families with appropriate services.

This view is captured in the following survey comments which were provided in response to the question of what actions stakeholders would most like to see under the response pillar:

"Again, equipping the early years workforce with training, resources and capacity will enable early detection and access to appropriate support for at risk children and families." (Survey respondent)

"Ensuring professionals are equipped with knowledge and confidence to support young people." (Survey respondent)

"It is crucial that children and young people have a safe confidential space to share their experiences, adequate training to frontline workers is essential to ensure that children and young people do not fall through the gaps." (Survey respondent)

"Having competent professionals across all settings are critical to provide the victim survivors with the right response." (Survey respondent)

"establish national workforce capacity, learning and development support for professionals across all areas such as school, police, youth justice and youth and accommodation services..." (Survey respondent)

"...ensuring professionals are equipped with knowledge and confidence to support..." (Survey respondent)

These survey responses align with the priorities of the 2024 ANROWS 'In their own right' report which identified eight priorities for action to support children and young people's safety, within which, ensuring sectors working with children and young people are equipped to deliver trauma- and DFSV-informed care was included (Gillfeather-Spetere & Watson, 2024).

School-based workers were consistently identified by stakeholders. This is unsurprising given the amount of time that children spend within the school environment. Stakeholders often spoke to the significant opportunity that teachers have to identify young people who may be experiencing or at risk of harm, to provide a meaningful response to their disclosure and to support referrals into the service system. Survey respondents commented:

"I would like to see a stronger emphasis on ensuring that responses to children and young people who have experienced violence are consistent, trauma-informed and coordinated across all settings, including schools, tertiary education providers..." (Survey respondent)

"...there are challenges at school in terms of disclosure because there isn't that sort of specific training around responding to specific cultural needs..." (SectorExpertA)

A strong theme emerging from both the survey and consultation was that workforce capability extends beyond one-off training. As one survey respondent succinctly stated, 'Avoid the one-off trainings, we know they don't work'. Stakeholders emphasised the need for sustained investment in workforce development, including ongoing supervision, professional development, trauma-informed practice, child development, cultural responsiveness and clear referral pathways. As one survey respondent observed:

“A skilled and well-supported workforce is essential for responding effectively to violence and abuse. This includes investing in training, supervision and professional development in areas such as trauma-informed practice, child development, family violence and cultural responsiveness; while also ensuring workloads, wellbeing and remuneration reflect the complexity of the work. Strengthening workforce capability improves outcomes for children and reduces the risk of re-traumatisation.” (Survey respondent)

Strengthening workforce capability should not rely solely on continuing professional development after professionals enter the workforce. Stakeholders also recognised that workforce capability should begin before professionals enter practice, with universities and professional accreditation bodies playing a critical role in preparing the future workforce. Given that teachers, doctors, nurses, psychologists, social workers, youth workers and other frontline professionals are likely to encounter children and young people experiencing violence throughout their careers, some stakeholders noted that responding to domestic, family and sexual violence should be recognised as a core professional competency in pre-service university curriculum rather than a specialist area of practice. As one stakeholder remarked:

“...respectful relationships, consent, prevention of violence, gender equity, these are specialised subject areas and we are asking educators to take on these advanced, complex, nuanced, intersectional conversations in their free period for 30 minutes and they're trained as a maths teacher. In what world is that going to actually set anybody up for success? Literally no one is set up for success in that.” (FG6)

Embedding consistent, evidence-informed curriculum on domestic, family and sexual violence within relevant undergraduate and postgraduate degrees would help ensure graduates enter the workforce with a foundational understanding of children's experiences of violence, trauma-informed communication, responding safely to disclosures, child development, risk assessment, referral pathways and the impacts of coercive control and child victimisation. Such an approach would establish a nationally consistent baseline capability across the future workforce while reducing reliance on ad hoc or employer-specific training after graduation.

There was also broad recognition that building workforce capability must be accompanied by organisational policies, leadership support and realistic workloads that enable professionals to respond safely and effectively when children disclose experiences of violence. Taken together, these contributions across the consultations highlight that improving responses to child victimisation requires every child-serving workforce to possess the confidence and capability to respond safely when children disclose violence. While specialist services remain essential, they cannot replace the role of trusted adults in children's everyday lives. Equipping professionals across universal services to recognise abuse, respond appropriately, provide immediate support and facilitate access to specialist interventions represents a critical opportunity to strengthen both early intervention and response across Australia's service system.

Recommended action: Equip non-specialist workforces with the ability to respond to disclosures of child victimisation.

The Australian Government should work with states and territories to strengthen workforce capability across the education, health, early childhood, justice and community service sectors, ensuring professionals who work with children and families are equipped to identify victimisation, respond safely to disclosures, undertake trauma-informed communication, understand child development, assess immediate safety, and facilitate timely referral to specialist support. As part of this, the Australian Government should work with universities and relevant professional accreditation bodies to embed minimum domestic, family and sexual violence competencies (including recognising indicators of child victimisation, trauma-informed responses to disclosure, child development, coercive control, risk assessment, cultural safety, referral pathways and mandatory reporting responsibilities) within the accreditation standards for professions working with children and families,

including teaching, medicine, nursing, midwifery, law, psychology, social work and youth work. Governments should also support ongoing professional development, supervision and reflective practice to ensure capability is maintained throughout professionals' careers.

*I didn't quite realise how important it would be
for me to even just hear someone say,
'I believe you,' ...
It feels like a weight has kind of been lifted.
(Dylan, cited in StudyA)*

*Every time I told someone,
it felt like rolling the dice.
Would they help, or would it make it worse?
(Sophie, cited in StudyD)*

Fund services for children and young people commensurate with the scale of the challenge.

Children and young people experience violence and abuse at significant rates. As noted earlier in this report, the Australian Child Maltreatment Study found that more than six in ten Australians experienced at least one form of child maltreatment during childhood (Haslam et al., 2023; Matthews et al., 2023). Yet despite the scale of children's victimisation, stakeholders consistently described Australia's service system as remaining overwhelmingly adult-focused.

Stakeholders argued that although governments have increasingly recognised children as victim-survivors in legislation, policy and public discourse, this recognition has not been matched by sustained investment in specialist services designed specifically to meet children's needs. One academic described this disconnect as the central barrier to reform:

"...despite statements of political commitment, I still don't think we have the actions to back up that political commitment at either federal level or state or territory level, and in particular, we don't have the expression of that commitment in sufficient investment financially, which is a precondition for genuine reforms and progress in this area. By financial investment, I'm referring to obviously economic investment in services, but also in sector and practitioner support. So we don't have either enough money, and we don't have enough people and services." (AcademicD)

This view was echoed in survey responses. One survey respondent described:

"Implementation [of the First Action Plan] has been significantly weakened by chronic underfunding and under-resourcing across the sector. Many services continue to operate at or beyond capacity, contributing to workforce burnout, poor staff retention and limited access to timely support. While investment in crisis services is essential, funding has remained heavily concentrated at the crisis end of the system, with insufficient investment in prevention and early intervention. This means services are often responding after significant harm has already occurred, rather than preventing violence or disrupting harmful attitudes and behaviours earlier." (Survey respondent)

Stakeholders consistently observed that while governments have increasingly recognised children as victim-survivors in legislation, policy and public discourse, this recognition has not been matched by sustained investment in services designed specifically to meet their needs. As a result, many children and young people continue to encounter limited-service availability, long waiting lists, restrictive eligibility criteria and significant geographic inequities when attempting to access specialist support. Stakeholders emphasised that this gap undermines efforts to improve early intervention and response. As captured in the following survey responses and focus group excerpts:

"More funding is desperately needed to provide frontline services." (Survey respondent)

"The need is much greater but we are limited in our expansion due to funding." (Survey respondent)

"And I also think we need to recognise, that it's a long-term issue – it's not short-term. Counselling doesn't happen over months... it's one of the things with our funding models at the moment, it's sort of like you get funded for this amount of time, and yet you've got these kids who might be, 'Okay, we're doing really well.' Six months' time, a year's time, something triggers, they need to get access to that support again." (FG1)

"...service drift is real... women are on the books for a long time waiting, and children are on the books a long time waiting. So really, if we can get in as soon as the notification is made,

as soon as we're aware of family violence, the outcome is going to be so much better."
(SectorExpertW)

While stakeholders acknowledged that the funding ask is significant, particularly in the context of wider government funding constraints and the cost-of-living crisis, the cost of inaction and continuing the status quo was also emphasised. For example, one stakeholder argued:

"...it's a big financial investment... but when you talk about the true cost to the family, to the child, to the community, to the system... it always strikes me as so short-sighted that we don't... forecast what that would save in 10 and 20 years." (SectorExpertW)

The consequences of underinvestment are evident in the current service system. Stakeholders described services that are already operating beyond capacity, with waiting lists delaying children's access to safety, therapeutic support and recovery.

Specifically, in the survey, respondents were asked whether their organisation had a waitlist for services/programs/initiatives for children and young people who experience violence or abuse. Of the survey respondents who answered this question (n=50), more than half (n=29) reported that their organisation maintained a waiting list for services, programs or initiatives supporting children and young people experiencing violence or abuse.

These respondents were then invited to provide details about their waiting list. Anecdotally the need for increased investment in services for young victim-survivors is abundantly clear. Practitioners shared details of waiting lists, many spanning up to six months, including for children with complex and high-risk needs. For example, one survey respondent shared, that they work in a statewide, therapeutic trauma service for children aged up to 18 years old:

"We are only funded to see 2% of the most complex cases in child protection - we need increased funding, as demand far outstrips capacity; our FV therapeutic services have a 6-month waitlists." (Survey respondent)

Other waitlist details shared included:

"At times the waitlist can be up to 200 people waiting for support as victims of crime/sexual abuse." (Survey respondent)

"intake is completed ASAP after referral received, but it takes on average 2-4 weeks before the young person is allocated an ongoing worker. At times that wait time has been up to 12 weeks. The young person still receives brief intervention support during wait time through an 'active hold' process." (Survey respondent)

Similar anecdotes emerged from the focus group discussions. For example, three stakeholders – each based in different states and territories - commented:

"I think that inequity, access to services is huge – it's absolutely huge. And it needs so much more resourcing to be able to reduce those waiting lists. We're here on the Gold Coast, and we have huge waiting lists – we can't get anymore money for counsellors to bring in with our kids. And there's nothing more frustrating, when I'm speaking to our counsellors that they're sitting there, and they know they've got 30 or 40 kids sitting there waiting for counselling for sexual abuse and can't do anything. I think that we need more funding into specialist trauma services." (FG1)

"Workloads for child protection workers in the NT are back on the 100 list. We'd got them down to 30 at a stage – how can you possibly service a hundred kids on your caseload; it is absolutely inhuman." (FG1)

"Often the waiting lists are huge... you could be waiting two years for a referral... So, the waiting lists for counselling and therapy is far too long for these children." (FG)

Where services cannot meet demand, stakeholders shared that children are being turned away without receiving the safety supports they are seeking. As captured in the following survey and focus group excerpts:

"We have to turn children and young people in need of legal and social work support away because we don't have the resources to assist them." (Survey respondent)

"Simply - demand exceeds what we are funded to provide. We are required to do more service delivery with less money (which equals less staffing capacity)." (Survey respondent)

"There's nothing more frustrating, when I'm speaking to our counsellors that they're sitting there, and they know they've got 30 or 40 kids sitting there waiting for counselling for sexual abuse and can't do anything." (FG1)

Stakeholders shared that governments are aware of these pressures. Several organisations reported routinely sharing waiting-list data with funding departments as part of requests for additional investment, yet described little corresponding increase in resources.

"Our Waitlist generally has around 20-30 families on it at any given time and wait-times can vary between around 3 to 9 months. Our waitlist is shared with stakeholders in the Queensland and Federal Governments." (Survey respondent)

"Our waitlist went from 1 month to 9 months when local statutory/clinical services began turning clients away due to being at capacity ... Waitlist data was shared with [Government] ... but we were told by our funding managers that requests to fund additional staff to meet demand were unlikely to be approved by the [Department]." (Survey respondent)

"We go to government constantly sort of saying, 'Look, these are the size of our waiting lists.' And they're sort of saying, 'There's nothing else in the bucket.' ... it may mean that we're going to have to lose a couple of counsellors, in order to be able to keep everyone on. So, it's really, really tough." (FG1)

Other practitioners noted that while they had a number of children on a waitlist, these clients were provided with semi-regular (for example, fortnightly) check-ins to monitor risk and undertake dynamic triage.

There was widespread recognition that the investment needed must span the entire service system, including domestic and family violence, mental health, alcohol and other drug services, disability services, housing, education and justice. This reflects the separate systems and entry points that children and young people experiencing violence and abuse will navigate – system-wide sustained funding commensurate with the scale of the challenge would ensure there is a 'no wrong door' guarantee for young people seeking help.

Stakeholders emphasised that increasing overall funding alone would not be sufficient. Investment must also address longstanding geographic inequities in access to specialist services. Children and young people living in rural, regional and remote communities were consistently described as facing fewer specialist services, greater workforce shortages and longer travel distances to access support. Two stakeholders described:

"Urgent reform is required to address persistent service demand pressures and regional inequities that undermine the effectiveness of recovery pathways." (Survey respondent)

"Just pay the wages that people need to live in these remote communities, the drop-in centers and staffing them properly. I think... the remote needs to be ramped up a lot. People just don't have anywhere to go." (CommissionerF)

Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of ensuring services are accessible, culturally safe and responsive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse and refugee backgrounds, children with disability, LGBTIQ+ children and young people, and other groups whose experiences of violence and access to support may differ. Stakeholders argued that a nationally coordinated investment approach should prioritise equitable access to services regardless of where children live or who they are.

Recommended Action: Fund services for children and young people commensurate with the scale of the challenge.

The Australian Government should work with states and territories to substantially increase investment in specialist services for children and young people experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence, ensuring funding is commensurate with the prevalence and complexity of children's victimisation. This investment should support timely access to specialist therapeutic services, advocacy, recovery supports and integrated responses that recognise children as victim-survivors in their own right. Funding should also prioritise equitable access to services across Australia, including for children and young people living in rural, regional and remote communities, and ensure services are culturally safe, disability inclusive and responsive to the diverse experiences and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, refugee and migrant children and young people, LGBTIQ+ children and young people, and other priority cohorts.

"They delayed me.

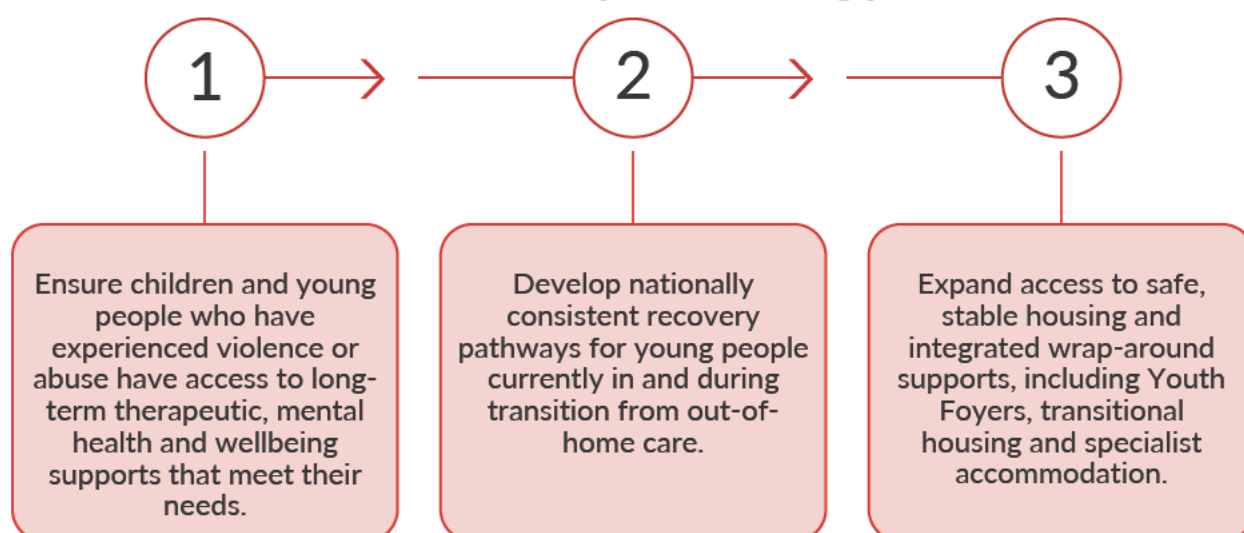
So, it was kind of a bad experience ...

I was wait listed ... just left me waiting ...

***I think that they should be easily accessible services for all young people that
you can walk in."***

(Mia, cited in StudyA)

4. Actions under the Recovery and Healing pillar



Throughout the consultations, there was less discussion related to recovery and healing among stakeholders across the interviews and focus groups. Where recovery and healing for children and young people was discussed, often times there were generic calls for greater supports rather than specific actions. Relative to other pillars, particularly response and prevention, this likely reflects an evolving understanding of what recovery and healing means in practice for children and young people. For instance, stakeholders reflected:

"One of the things we hear a lot is lack of access for children and young people around longer term recovery and healing support, so therapeutic supports." (FG2)

"I think we need to get better at obviously recognising that recovery can come earlier. We tend to assume that if there is family violence present in a family unit, and then the - either the adult perpetrator is removed or say Mum and kids leave, then, "Oh, we've done the job." And then it's only once things tip into crisis that we're suddenly saying, "Perhaps we'd better lean in and invest." The recovery has got to happen right there and then were it to prevent that trajectory of harm from locking in further." (FG3)

Stakeholders explicitly reflected on the limited attention on healing and recovery as part of efforts to prevent and respond to family, domestic and sexual violence, with the exception of healing-based programs and initiatives that have been led within First Nations communities. Where there are recovery focused programs or supports, stakeholders noted they were varied in design, availability and accessibility across jurisdictions and that there are significant challenges facing children and young people in rural and regional areas with regards to accessing the support they need. Two stakeholders explained:

"I think we also need to think about the fact that regional and remote access to these services are absolutely a huge issue in this country. We're such a huge country. And looking at different options, whether it's Telehealth, whatever it might be - being able to provide that specialist service is absolutely critical." (FG1)

"Yeah, so you know, for me, particularly like clinical and therapeutic care for abused children. You know, we have some states like Victoria where that is more widely available than states like Queensland where that's actually really difficult to access and quite poorly funded." (AcademicB)

Noting challenges related to access, there was shared recognition among stakeholders that where recovery and healing is effectively supported, it is an important part of domestic, family and sexual violence prevention efforts. Two stakeholders shared:

"If we have children who have been exposed to domestic and family violence coming into contact with the child protection system, what we do we do so that 10 years, 20 years later when they themselves are parents, that they're not perpetuating cycles of violence. So that recovery actually becomes primary prevention for the next generation." (FG1)

Recovery IS prevention. (Survey respondent)

The following section details the actions recommended for the Second Action Plan relevant to the Recovery and Healing pillar.

Ensure children and young people who have experienced violence or abuse have access to long-term therapeutic, mental health and wellbeing supports that meet their needs.

Long term mental health supports for children and young people who have experienced violence and abuse was the most support (by a significant margin) recovery and healing action proposed in the survey. Specially, almost 90 per cent of survey respondents included the following action in their top 5: "Ensure children and young people experiencing violence or abuse have access to long-term therapeutic, mental health and wellbeing supports that extend beyond the point of crisis and are responsive to changing needs over time".

Across the interviews and focus groups a number of stakeholders reflected that, while there is a growing understanding of childhood trauma on brain development, this is often times not reflected in policy or practice. One focus group participant commented:

"We still haven't properly grappled with the impact of trauma on kids' neurodevelopment. I think there's still an assumption across a lot of the service sector that children - especially young children - are resilient, they won't remember. There's this weird legacy where, while we might recognise them better, but we're still making assumptions very much from an adult-focused lens." (FG4)

During one of the focus groups with youth advocates, there was interest in promoting a more mainstream understanding of the impacts of trauma across the Australian community. One youth advocate shared:

"I'm really big on people understanding just how much ... the trauma does impact the brain and totally reshape it. I feel like a lot of people have like completely no idea that it even just like starts in the womb, the yelling, everything like the environment you're in, the stress from mum and whatnot, or like you know, even reversing the roles if it's a single dad with a toddler and the abuse is coming from mum. I yeah really would love for like just the whole of Australia to really understand like the neuroscience behind it all, and you know I think a lot of the time as well trauma is so mistaken for ADHD and other mental health issues, and then people are wrongly diagnosed, and then that their suffering is prolonged, and that's really crap. So I think a lot of that does start at the core of people. Yeah, really understanding trauma and what it does to the entire like body, the brain, the nervous system, and everything." (YouthAdvocateD)

There was also a recognition of the multi-faceted and ongoing nature of recovery and healing. Children and young people who have experienced violence will likely present with multiple needs

which vary with intensity over time. Progress will often not follow a linear trajectory and there may still be contact with the person causing harm, particularly when that person is a parent. Recognising these complexities, stakeholders reflected:

“Children that experience trauma and harm, or even adults who've had those experiences, recovery is not a linear process, it's actually quite a significant journey, and you might need help with sleep sometimes, you might need help with emotion regulation, you might need help with social anxiety. Whatever the case may be, and that will vary at different times. You know, depression often presents itself as agitation, you know, antisocial types of behaviours. But people focus on the diagnosis rather than how do you really do the work that will help a kid shift past that.” (CommissionerA)

“What we see with young people and children is that they're often still involved with perpetrators of violence, so the even children at refuges are still probably having some contact with violence perpetrator. Young children that we see often still have some contact, so we don't we don't think necessarily about this as a clean cut moment where the child no longer is at risk of harm, and therefore we can start embarking on a therapeutic and recovery-based journey.” (SectorExpertU)

“Recovery and healing from violence and abuse do not occur within short service timeframes. The impacts of trauma often emerge and change throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood, requiring ongoing and flexible support rather than crisis-driven interventions alone.” (Survey respondent)

This supports the need to fund long-term and flexible supports to meet the recovery and healing needs of children and young people who have experienced violence and abuse. This was called for among several stakeholders and the youth advocates we engaged. Presently, funding and associated constraints on access to services does not align with the reality of what children and young people who have experienced violence need. One youth advocate explained:

“there needs to be a focus and investment on more longer term, like psychosocial supports ... that whole of service approach is so so important, and just yeah, I just can't emphasise how important that is for responding to young people who are you know starting to use violence or starting to show those maybe like harmful behaviors, but also supporting the family and like the family unit as well.” (YouthAdvocateC)

Mirroring this view, other stakeholders commented:

“If we're talking response and recovery, if there's one thing I would love to see it is flexible models for sustained engagement. Step up, step down. So regardless of who you are working with, we cannot put a six week timeframe on recovery and access to counselling. So if there's my one desire, it's that we actually think about what that journey is, and allow flexibility in the way in which we can best support.” (FG5)

“I think we really have to understand that recovery from sexual abuse and trauma more generally, doesn't occur over a few weeks, a few months – it can take decades. And we need to ensure that there is resourcing for that support out there.” (FG1)

“Children should be able to access evidence-informed interventions that support emotional regulation, attachment, resilience, recovery and wellbeing over time, without facing lengthy waitlists, service gaps or abrupt endings when funding cycles conclude.” (Survey respondent)

The reality for many children and young people who have experienced violence or abuse and seek supports to heal and recover is limited services and long waiting lists. Ironically, this is particularly the

case for young people who have been victims of violence alone and are not causing harm to others. As one stakeholder explained:

"I think there definitely needs to be more resources for these young people showing them, helping them to find other avenues to deal with what they're feeling internally. Often what they're displaying is what they've seen and grown up in and think is normal, behaviour with communicating with others. And often the waiting lists are huge. I know here in Tasmania, you know, you could be waiting two years for a referral to come place and that's, you know, the perfect time for that referral is when a support worker is involved. You know, it's so much harder for a parent to connect with these other services when there isn't a support in place. So the waiting lists for counselling and therapy is far too long for these children." (FG8)

Accessibility is further compounded by service rationing and victims of crime eligibility criteria which does not reflect some children and young people's experiences of victimisation. For instance, one stakeholder lamented:

"We still have problems with children who experience extreme violence – family violence, domestic violence – but who are not necessarily physically hurt in the process. They might witness the homicide – parental homicide, for example – are not deemed victims of crime under legislation, and therefore don't have access to, not even proper therapeutic and healing and recovery services, but just don't have access to services, period. Again, very longstanding problem in our systems design." (FG5)

Stakeholders also highlighted the need for specialist care responding to the specific needs of children and young people. It was noted that while these responses are often times not "badged" as working with children and young people who have experienced violence and abuse, these victim-survivors will be disproportionately represented. For instance:

"if we look at girls who might have experienced sexual abuse, but there might have been exposure to domestic violence, neglect, disruption in childhood, you know, at 11 or 12, that's often where we then see the onset of emotional dysregulation, self harm, eating disorders, and so again in Melbourne, there are really comprehensive personality, early intervention personality disorder programs that are really, really effective, and so they're not badged as you know supporting kids exposed to violence, but all of their caseload is. You know, if you've got a personality disorder, whatever we want to call it, at 12 or 13, but those girls not only have been abused, they're going to be abused. If you have an eating disorder and you're self-harming at 12 or 13, like the likelihood that you're going to get through adolescence, let alone into your late 20s or 30s, without sexual assault and domestic violence, is extremely low. And so there is sort of like that specialisation in in young people's care." (Academic B)

"We need to talk about specialist trauma responses, because there are so few and far between. And really strong trauma unpacking is a highly skilled intervention, and I think we haven't got enough highly skilled people to do that. We've got a children's counselling service at Gen West – it is oversubscribed. Do you think I can get any more money for it, despite the evidence, despite the waitlist, despite the fact that child protection, and not referring in any kids in care, and we're trying to get them in – like it's all of those things. The service is there, and it's being utilised, but it's not being funded properly." (FG1)

"So, I think we need specialist workforces that really understand development, that really understand trauma, attachment, relational security, all of the conditions that then allow you to work therapeutically with children, and you're not going to get that in successions, and you're not going to get that at Headspace." (CommissionerA)

Finally, the links between trauma and neurodivergence were also discussed. Noting recent changes to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), stakeholders questioned whether the healing and recovery needs of children and young people who had experienced violence or abuse would be disproportionately impacted by these reforms. Two stakeholders explained:

“I think the impact of trauma and neurodivergence really does need to be unpicked a little bit more, in the way that trauma can present as neurodivergence as well. So, I think there’s some thinking around, how do we actually really skilfully start to unpack some of those issues – and the impact, the potential impact of the NDIS not providing support to those families anymore. And I wonder whether there’ll be a higher group of people who were experiencing family violence, who won’t get access to services.” (FG1)

“I think we see a lot of children misdiagnosed with behavioural issues when it’s actually trauma related. So what we’re also trying to do is build the skills of the family to identify what is trauma and what is maybe behavioural or you know neurodivergence, where we’ve worked with some children who’ve been diagnosed and medicated to actually treat what is essentially trauma related.” (SectorExpertV)

Recommended Action: The Federal Government, working with states and territories, should implement a mental health and wellbeing guarantee ensuring children and young people who have experienced violence or abuse have access to long-term therapeutic, mental health and wellbeing supports that meet their needs.

Supports provided and the associated funding should better reflect the realities of recovery and healing for children and young people – long-term, non-linear, uncertain, multi-faceted and requiring specialist skill sets. Consideration should be given to streamlining eligibility criteria to minimise impacts of the trauma “narrative burden”. With regards to funding quantum for the guarantee, government should be informed by potential savings of effective recovery and healing due to decreased intergenerational violence.

*"I didn't really trust myself after.
I felt like everything was my fault,
and the things that happened were all mine.
It is continuing to take a long time to really understand that it wasn't a dream
and it really happened,
but the blame isn't all on me and
I should just learn from it and forget it."
(cited in cited in StudyE)*

*"I feel like I've carried that hurt with me,
and I'm only just dealing with it in counselling now
and still scared to unpack it all because it was a lot.
I think having that support to unpack it all earlier
and start dealing with it would've changed who I am now,
I think, as a person.
So I think being a bit more heard and
having that support to work through it would've been helpful."
(Daisey, cited in StudyB)*

Develop nationally consistent recovery pathways for young people currently in and during transition from the out-of-home care system.

Children and young people in the out-of-home care system were identified as warranting specific attention as part of the Second Action Plan. Several stakeholders highlighted the substantial impacts of domestic, family and sexual violence on this cohort. For instance, one stakeholder shared:

"I think we need to really be putting a lens on that child protection system at the same time as we're talking about this (Second Action Plan), because we know that domestic and family violence is the biggest driver of kids going into care. We know that often when there's talk about neglect, that it's often around issues of family violence, either financial abuse, poor housing – a whole range of different things – but also, it is people living in poverty that and up mostly in those systems as well." (FG1)

Mindful of these links, there were concerns raised about continued harm experienced by children and young people while in the out of home care system. These concerns were often shared with a sense of exasperation given they have been well documented in a range of reviews and inquiries. Stakeholders shared:

"Children in out of home care need to be a focus across the three main plans, particularly in relation to child sexual abuse, because we know that they are vulnerable on multiple levels throughout their journey through childhood, and that includes child sexual exploitation by organised groups of paedophiles ... that's an overlooked area, we don't have the right laws, we don't call it child trafficking, whereas the UK and the US do we. There's nothing the AFP can do, local police do nothing, you know, kids are trafficked from out of home care, so they're abused in their families, then they're abused in their out of home care experiences." (CommissionerB)

"And when we look at the way in which teenage girls get blamed for their own sexual abuse, we come across it all the time, you know, 12-year-old girls in out-of-home care, who have an adult boyfriend, or who are being given alcohol and drugs in exchange for sex, and no one will do anything because they treat that 13 year old girl as as making choices, and the view is that she's going to have sex eventually, so it's just happened a bit early. We actually don't get that narrative with the sexual abuse of boys because no one thinks that it's inevitable that a boy is going to have sex with another male, and we see high rates of prosecution and conviction in male sexual abuse cases because you can't apply rape myths to a 12-year-old boy, but you can still apply rape myths to a 12-year-old girl." (AcademicB)

Stakeholders highlighted opportunities that are being missed to better identify and address risk, and to meet the safety and support needs of children and young people both while they are in out of home care and at the point of transition. This includes mental health supports, housing, improved income support and strengthening continuity of care. A youth advocate remarked:

"Wraparound support, psychosocial support. One thing that comes to mind is really when you have young people who kind of sit at that cusp between, you know, say, like almost 18 ... transitioning into adult services and community services. If it's say, for example, mental health, that's a really big transition period, it's often not met with continuity of care and you know good handover. So that that wraparound support for young people across different areas of their well being, and you know, kind of longer term recovery supports that plan for how they will transition from different life stages is so important. Like I know the focus is you know children and young people, but what happens after a young person ages out of the system is also a really critical moment that yeah a lot of young people fall through the gaps." (YouthAdvocateC)

Building on this, two stakeholders similarly commented:

"From our [young care leavers] legal service, this is particularly an issue around young care leavers being transitioned from out-of-home care and not being supported into safe and affordable, stable housing. There's also - if there were national standards around some of the issues with child protection, that would be really useful." (FG3)

"I think there are so many opportunities to intervene at different inflection points, and like one group, I like I reflect a lot on care leavers. So you know we know like it can be a vulnerable developmental moment sometimes young people are exiting without much support, and we know that there can be a bit of a pipeline into homelessness and housing vulnerability, and we know that young people can be really at risk of adversity and violence at that point as well, or exploitation." (SectorExpertR)

One Commissioner captured the experience of children and young people in out of home care reflecting that support tends to kick in once the young person starts to cause harm to others. As we have touched on elsewhere in this report as it relates to other pillars, this means supports to address victimisation, and to facilitate recovery and healing often arrive too late:

"it's actually really hard for kids to get their needs met ... it's a pretty ordinary experience for women because often that they're in the process of survival, not necessarily in the process of parenting in the way that they might want to parent. But by the time a kid gets into that sort of set of circumstances, they have experienced all sorts of harm. There's no real recognition of cumulative harm, I mean, that's almost you can never get those matters accepted in the children's court because the fundamental belief is that children should be with their parents, which is which is fine, absolutely fine, but for those children that can't be, you have to wait until something they behave terribly, or you know, there's some sort of catastrophic event for them to get support. So the littles can, but there's that whole period of development where kids aren't big enough, you know so you know that sort of 6, 7, 8, 9, 10-year-old, They start hitting kids, and they're pushing, and they're doing, they're just sort of they're starting to disengage in school, that's where the opportunity lies to really think about the types of restorative work that you might do with kids that is about their presentation, and without always having to diagnose. kids have assessment after assessment after assessment after assessment. So the speechy looks at them, the social worker looks at them, the psychiatrist looks them, like everybody looks at them and then waits, and there is an opportunity to really think about a specialist workforce that turns up, that really engages with children, helps them make sense of their experience, helps them understand what their triggers are, how to respond when they feel upset, you know teaches, you know, spends time with them on those pro social things, helps them become part of part of belonging." (CommissionerA)

As part of discussing opportunities to better meet the needs of children and young people in out of home care, stakeholders pointed to the importance of responses that draw on and are tailored to culture, religion, people with disability, gender and sexual identity. For example, stakeholders commented:

"... people talk about culture being culture being safe, but if you've not been engaged or attached to your culture, how do we think you know, a 10 to 14 year old who maybe hasn't had exposure to culture, how do we actually help them with that? Because you know, if you look at the kids in YJ, they're not connected to culture often, they're actually connected to something else because they haven't found their place." (CommissionerA)

"You're having children continuing with cumulative harm because the loss of the connection with their culture identity, within their religious belief, you find a child that feels that, "I have no place, I don't belong"." (FG2)

“And I’ll just reiterate the other bit about the very, very high percentage LGBTIQ+ children who are in out-of-home care. Anecdotally, people tell us it’s 40% and up of LGBTIQ+ identifying teenage kids in out-of-home care that have run away from their homes. That have escaped family violence, but have escaped it and are identifying as LGBTIQ+.” (FG4)

“Yeah, and so and you and you have sort of talked about with people that stat of you know, I think 40 to 50% of young people in residential care living with disability.” (SectorExpertW)

Recommended Action: The Federal Government, working with states and territories, should develop nationally consistent recovery pathways for young people currently in and during transition from the out-of-home care system.

The Commonwealth Government has already established National Standards for out-of-home care which were developed in 2011. With this aspiration in mind, and to reflect evidence that has emerged over the last 15 years, the Federal Government should place an explicit focus on improving life outcomes and continuity of care for children and young people in the out of home care system. Funding mechanisms such as the recently established Commonwealth Outcomes Fund provide a potential avenue to engage with states and territories as part of this effort, together with policy and funding levers that are under the Federal Government’s direct control.

*“Residential care just made everything that
I experienced even worse ...
Everything I endured – loud noise, glass breaking –
it was all triggers for me ...
you’d think the staff members there would care.”
(Caroline, cited in StudyD)*

Expand access to safe, stable housing and integrated wrap-around supports, including Youth Foyers, transitional housing and specialist accommodation.

Housing was a recurring theme across interviews, focus groups and survey responses. Stakeholders saw this as fundamental to efforts to address domestic, family and sexual violence. There were frequent calls for the housing needs of children and young people who experience violence and abuse to feature prominently as part of the Second Action Plan. Stakeholders shared:

"I think that one of the things that's totally missing ... is any attention to housing, health, and justice, and family law, like actually the things that the federal government has some control over seem to be missing ... once women have financial, you know, financial counselling and access to legal support, they're actually leaving in a planned way, in a much less destructive way, and you know, so these basic things for children around poverty and around housing, they're just absolutely instrumental to their safety, and so they can't be ignored as actually linchpins in the whole response. So these big, big issues like you know housing, poverty, you know they need to be addressed as an important part of the work, and not ignored, and sort of pushed out as though they're not part of the action plan ... they're central to the action plan ... the Anne Summer's report on the choice, you know, poverty or violence is very real, and so addressing, particularly social housing, but also the financial counsellors have a big role to play here." (AcademicA)

"If I just had one, I would say it does need to be the safe and secure housing, both for young people who need to exit a family situation, but also actually for the family." (FG5)

"Housing first has been shown to be an effective recovery strategy -- it's hard to work on mental health, re-engage with education or employment if you are transient." (Survey respondent)

"There have been new commitments to social housing, and those have made a difference on the ground, and will continue to make a difference, but I do think the next action plan needs to really take a much stronger view of the different way that escape from family violence, and recovery, is able to be achieved for people who are living in poverty, and who can't access the housing market in an independent way." (FG5)

Stakeholders expressed particular concerns regarding the limited housing options for unaccompanied young people. Anecdotes shared across the focus groups noted that these young people are often forced to choose between homelessness or remaining in an unsafe home where they face significant risks (on this, see further Ellard et al., 2025). Stakeholders commented:

"Unaccompanied young people fleeing violence from their family of origin are at higher risk of homelessness because they often lack the financial resources, community connections and living skills to be able to immediately source alternative housing." (Survey respondent)

"Obviously, I think a lot of folks have talked about housing, safe and affordable youth refuges, funding for youth refuges, and specialist disability accommodation. I don't know what it's like in other states and territories, but in Victoria, only 2% of public housing is leased to young people, so they're just locked out and on the waitlist for long, long periods of time, and completely locked out of the rental market. And what that means is they often return to unsafe situations where they continue to experience family violence, which is awful." (FG3)

"Hundreds of children and young people across Australia who have experienced family violence are forced into homelessness when they escape violence in the home, or forced to

return to unsafe home environments because they can't find safe and affordable housing.”
(Survey respondent)

In the absence of housing options, frontline staff reflected trying to do their best to develop safety plans and respond to associated mental health concerns for a young person accessing help. For instance, stakeholders commented:

“There’s just really limited youth specific options so it means we’re seeing more and more young people left between after they’ve exhausted all their couch surfing options, really unsafe refuges, temporary motels or rough sleeping ... including in situations where for example, if an IVO is ordered against them, that they’re seen as a preparator and so can’t access services and they’re not recognised as also being a victim survivor as well.” (FG3)

“We’re supporting them with safety plans and everything but they’re living in violent homes because they don’t want to live in refuges and crisis, that’s another whole lot of risk especially around their mental health.” (FG4)

Stakeholders did note that there has been some progress in this space, for example one stakeholder shared:

“We’re very proud in the refuge space, is that we have child support specialists at every refuge. So the children coming into refuge are getting support that is designed for them. Mum talks to our family support specialist and those workers work with the family as a dynamic. But then there’s also intentional time put aside for just the child and the child support specialist to really focus on their needs and their experiences. But I know that’s not everywhere.” (FG7)

Alongside recognition of progress was also an acknowledgement of the need to further embed wrap around supports in transitional housing and specialist accommodation. This includes practical supports focused on children and young people related to their education, service navigation, social supports as well as legal and financial support. Two stakeholders shared:

“What we see is that children who have experienced violence often have difficulty reaching like really key milestones. So that’s the homework hub is a great example of like trying to help them to achieve to catch up and achieve those milestones, and that and we see that as prevention work as well, given that we know that family violence is often intergenerational and systemically intergenerational.” SectorExpertU

“Money doesn’t solve everything, but I think money can help fix the structure of the way kids are really churned through a big system, and there’s no continuity of care a lot of the time. And I think that’s something we’re trying to really solidify is the child’s journey from the very moment they come in contact with our services to try and make it as fluid as possible ... just trying to navigate that system when you’ve experienced DV, you know, it’s impossible for children to do on their own. Very, very difficult for a caregiver who’s going through their own healing journey” (SectorExpertV)

Stakeholders also spoke about the need for greater emphasis on supports for children and young people’s families including relationship strengthening with the non-offending parent. Stakeholders commented:

“So definitely young people who come through homeless services who have experienced violence, and they’re asked about what would have helped, often they talked about things that are really about stronger family supports. So if we had safe housing, if we had – you know, “If mum wasn’t so stressed because we had secure housing, if mum had access to mental health services, if dad had access to alcohol and drug supports.” There’s such big

gaps across those service systems that I think - in homelessness, we have some youth homelessness, very limited amount of youth homelessness support programs, but those support programs are largely supporting the young person to access those, and supporting the family to access those kinds of services, but it's really hard to access services that don't exist." (FG5)

"I would suggest that a lot of that support has to be family-based in some way, you know, with a wide definition of family, so that you don't just have children in groups, but you have at the same time a group for the non-offending parent running parallel ... You know, like in terms of mother-child strengthening, you know, a lot of women are really putting the face of the perpetrator onto the children, and particularly the boys. You know, like you really need to be able to address that in the relationship work in recovery and healing. Certainly, that's not all women, but a lot, you know, like it is a pattern there that it's helpful to recognise and address ... it's really saying how can we connect children into networks of support and work with them about where their preferred networks are as well" (AcademicA)

Although addressing housing and wraparound supports will ultimately require funding, stakeholders pointed to instances that gave them hope that, with sufficient political will, progress is possible and some of the foundations are already in place. Two stakeholders explained:

"So I know that there's quite a bit of work that DSS and others are doing. Also in the housing space, thinking about the legislative change with the National Housing Infrastructure Facility that actually identified children and young people as victim survivors - escaping violence in their own right as well, which was really important. That was legislative change slipped in there, but it was a big deal I think, for anyone that's been in this space, rather than just women and children, it could be independent." (FG4)

"We can take hundreds of and thousands of individuals and families out of poverty through the COVID response, where benefit and benefits and allowances were significantly increased to alleviate pressures being experienced by families. So, whilst there's a violence connection there, in regard to those adequate benefits to sustain a range of positive family dynamics and reduce adverse outcomes were achieved through the increasing benefits. And when the health emergency stopped, a decision was made to reduce those benefits back to their standard levels, which then put a whole range of families back living below the poverty line and back into situations where there are greater pressures and concerns around housing security, enough finances to participate, getting healthy food on the table. So there ways in which we can look at other areas of the systems as important contributors to shaping the environment that contributes to a reduction in the likelihood of violence occurring." (SectorExpertP)

Recommended Action: The Federal Government should expand access to safe, stable housing and integrated wrap-around supports, including Youth Foyers, transitional housing and specialist accommodation.

The federal government could draw on policy and funding levers under their direct control including housing construction, Medicare, expanding eligibility for the leaving violence payments to young people, and tailored legal as well as financial counselling for young people. The focus of these efforts should particularly be placed on meeting the needs of unaccompanied children and young people escaping family, domestic or sexual violence.

Other recovery and healing related actions that were broadly supported through the focus groups and interviews:

- Address inequities in the payment system which adversely impact young people impacted by violence relative to adult victim survivors (e.g. eligibility for the leaving violence payment; the low rate of the unreasonable to live at home payment).
- Awareness raising, potentially through a public campaign and through workforce capacity building, to strengthen understanding of the impacts of trauma and what can realistically be expected as it relates to recovery and healing.

Other recovery and healing related actions that were broadly supported through the survey responses:

- Ensure children and young people experiencing violence or abuse have access to long-term therapeutic, mental health and wellbeing supports that extend beyond the point of crisis and are responsive to changing needs over time. This action was supported by 88 per cent of survey respondents (n=71).
- Build a nationally consistent child and youth centred recovery and healing system for children who have experienced violence or abuse, ensuring timely access to trauma-informed, culturally safe and flexible supports, including for young people who may lack stable housing, digital access, or a protective parent. This action was supported by 65 per cent of survey respondents (n=53).
Provide sustained, self-determined funding for culturally safe healing and recovery services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who have experienced violence or abuse, including by recognising healing as a collective, intergenerational and long-term process. This action was supported by 64 per cent of survey respondents (n=52).
- Expand access to safe, stable housing and integrated wrap-around supports, including Youth Foyers, transitional housing and specialist accommodation, as a foundation for recovery and healing. This action was supported by 64 per cent of survey respondents (n=52).
- Embed children's participation, agency and choice into recovery and healing planning, including through access to independent advocacy where required. This action was supported by 54 per cent of survey respondents (n=44).
- Embed children's and young people's lived expertise across national policy, service design, implementation and evaluation through permanent mechanisms for participation, co-design and accountability. This action was supported by 54 per cent of survey respondents (n=44).
- Develop nationally consistent transition and recovery pathways for young people moving into adulthood following experiences of violence or abuse, including those leaving out-of-home care, refuges, crisis accommodation and other service systems. This action was supported by 53 per cent of survey respondents (n=43).

*“We all have a spark in our eyes when we are younger ...
I am so much more than what I have been through ...
I was walking on eggshells for most of my life.
I have sworn to myself that I won’t walk on eggshells
because that’s a disservice to my younger self.”*

(Caroline, cited in StudyD)

*“if I didn’t speak out and say anything,
I would have still been [there]
and I wouldn’t know where I’d be right now.
Probably would have been dead,
or I would have been locked up.”*

*(Ivy, 16-year-old female, First Nations, experienced violence from age three, cited in
StudyA)*

GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Throughout the consultation there was clear recognition of the need to ensure that the Second Action Plan is accompanied by strong governance arrangements that support transparent accountability of implementation. Children's experiences of violence and abuse intersect across multiple policy domains, including education, health, housing, justice, child protection, disability and digital safety. While responsibility for these systems necessarily sits across different ministers and departments, throughout the consultation, stakeholders consistently argued that stronger national leadership is needed to ensure children's rights, safety and wellbeing remain a shared priority rather than becoming fragmented and deprioritised across separate policy agendas.

Stronger governance is not simply about creating new structures, but about improving accountability for outcomes. This includes ensuring clear ministerial responsibility, meaningful coordination across national strategies, transparent monitoring of progress, and genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and children and young people themselves. Without clear accountability mechanisms, implementation risks becoming focused on delivering actions rather than improving outcomes for children.

Throughout the consultations, stakeholders recognised that the implementation of the Second Action Plan provides an important opportunity to strengthen national leadership and accountability for children affected by violence and abuse. The recommendations in this section focus on governance arrangements that would improve coordination across government, elevate children's rights and participation in decision-making, strengthen accountability for implementation, and ensure national efforts are better aligned to improve outcomes for children and young people.

A Federal Minister for Children

Calls for Australia to re-establish a dedicated Federal Minister for Children have gained increasing momentum in recent years, including from the Australian Childhood Foundation and other child advocacy organisations (Act for Children, n.d.; Batty & Fitz-Gibbon, 2024; Fitz-Gibbon, 2025c; Hollonds, 2024; Sproul-Mellis, 2025). To explore stakeholder views on this proposal, survey participants were asked whether Australia should establish a dedicated Federal Minister for Children.⁴ Of the 91 survey participants that responded to this question, 85 per cent supported a Federal Minister for Children (n=77), 12 per cent were unsure (11), and 3 per cent did not think Australia needs this ministerial role (n=3). In a follow up question, survey respondents were invited to explain why they did or did not support this role.

The strongest message emerging from the survey is that a Federal Minister for Children would provide a mechanism for national leadership, accountability and coordination. Across the survey responses, participants consistently argued that children require a dedicated advocate within government to elevate their rights, voices and visibility in policy and decision-making. Only a small number of responses expressed reservations. Those concerns were generally not opposition in principle, but rather questioned whether a new minister would make a practical difference without genuine authority, funding and legislative responsibility.

Survey respondents repeatedly described children as citizens with distinct rights whose interests are frequently overlooked in public policy and political decision-making. Three survey respondents described:

⁴ We note there is currently a Federal Minister for youth and early childhood education, the Honourable Dr Jess Walsh, however, there is no Federal Minister for Children. Australia had a federal minister with the explicit title of Minister for Children and Youth Affairs from November 2001 to October 2004, held by Larry Anthony

"We want an equal focus on children in policy making as we do for all other citizens of Australia resulting in more coordinated responses for children with equal access to resources." (Survey respondent)

"Having a Federal Minister for Children would elevate the status of children and young people as citizens with distinct rights, needs, and interests that deserve dedicated attention at the highest levels of government. A Federal Minister for Children could provide national leadership and coordination to ensure that children's interests are consistently considered across government decision-making, while also ensuring that investment is long-term." (Survey respondent)

"I think children and young people deserve a clear voice and strong leadership at a national level. A dedicated Minister would help improve coordination across government, keep children's wellbeing a priority, and ensure greater accountability for improving outcomes. It would also help create a more consistent and long-term approach to prevention, early intervention, response and recovery." (Survey respondent)

Similar overarching reasons to support a proposal for a Federal Minister for Children were provided during the interviews and focus groups. One focus group participant explained:

"Absolutely there could be a minister for children at a federal level. There could be policy obligations across all departments... there could be legislation at a federal level that elevates children's rights... and yeah, I would support all those things." (SectorExpertR).

Focusing in on the importance of elevating and promoting children's rights, other survey respondents commented:

"I support the call because I think it symbolises the fact that children have rights." (Survey respondent)

"To promote and uphold the rights and voice of the child and keep this at the fore of all government policy and decision making." (Survey respondent)

"It is the only way to elevate child rights to the level of a national emergency." (Survey respondent)

"It's a no brainer for me, given the population of children and young people in Australia and their diversity it makes sense to have a dedicated Minister to hear them and represent them." (Survey respondent)

Many argued that because children cannot vote and are often represented only through adult systems, a dedicated Federal Minister would provide an important advocate for children's rights and interests within government. As captured in the following survey responses:

"Children make over 20% of the Australian population. That is a substantial proportion of the population who are not represented at the federal level. This is particularly important when you consider the backdrop of rapidly changing conditions of growing up in Australia." (Survey respondent)

"Children have their own unique and specific issues that need specific attention by a dedicated Minister." (Survey respondent)

"Because children's safety, wellbeing, and development need a clearer national focus and accountability. A dedicated Minister could help ensure that children's needs are not secondary within adult-focused responses. It would help young people inform policy and

responses so that these mechanisms are designed BY young people. It also allows the voices of those most vulnerable to be brought to the forefront.” (Survey respondent)

“I support this as there's a clear gap currently in advocacy and support for children experiencing violence, and there would be sound reason for a Federal Minister to make sure children are clearly accounted for in a range of Government priority settings and actions.” (Survey respondent)

As a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Australian Government is responsible for ensuring the rights and wellbeing of children are upheld in all decisions affecting them. As demonstrated in the survey responses here, stakeholders believed that a Federal Minister for Child could hold responsibility for ensuring this international obligation is better met. The right to participation, and the importance of ensuring that children have a voice in the matters that impact them, was frequently cited as reasons for why Australia needs a Federal Minister for Children. This is captured in the following survey responses:

“Children and young people's voices deserve to be represented in all that we do.” (Survey respondent)

“Ensuring the voice of the child is brought to the table and is heard. Too often children's voices are left out of the conversation even with best intentions.” (Survey respondent)

“I think having someone who's role it is to hold the voice of the child in parliament is vital to the other adults remembering children's needs.” (Survey respondent)

“Evidence is clear that the voice of infants and young children continues to be overlooked in government and systems development.” (Survey respondent)

“This is an urgent position that acknowledges children need a voice.” (Survey respondent)

“Children and children's rights need to stand alone to ensure their voices are heard and that they are prioritised in safety.” (Survey respondent)

Interestingly, in making this point, a number of survey respondents specifically noted that children do not vote, and therefore it is important to ensure they have a dedicated minister to represent their needs. Two survey respondents described:

“To improve intergenerational equity and to provide a ministerial voice for the Australians not old enough to vote.” (Survey respondent)

“Children are not allowed to vote and do not have a voice. There is a power imbalance. Children deserve a voice.” (Survey respondent)

Recognition of the value of ensuring that children have a ministerial voice in the federal parliament was often accompanied by reflection that to date this has not occurred. Two survey respondents reflected:

“Children are a particularly vulnerable and marginalised group in politics. The needs of children are often minimised or ignored except to promote the ideas and needs of adults. They need their own voice and advocacy within both Federal and State governments.” (Survey respondent)

“The voices of children are not heard, particularly at a government level where a lot of decisions are made primarily by middle aged white men who I feel can be out of touch with the voice of a child.” (Survey respondent)

Another theme emerging from the survey responses was the perceived need for stronger national leadership and accountability for children's safety, wellbeing and rights. Survey respondents consistently argued that a dedicated Federal Minister for Children would provide a clear point of responsibility within government, ensuring that children's issues remain a sustained policy priority rather than competing with broader ministerial responsibilities. Stakeholders described the role as an opportunity to strengthen political leadership, champion children's interests at the highest levels of government, improve transparency and accountability for national outcomes, and provide oversight of the implementation of policies affecting children and young people. This viewpoint is illustrated in the following survey remarks:

"It's hard to escalate issues impacting children without a dedicated Minister at a federal level with portfolio responsibility and budget to focus on issues impacting children." (Survey respondent)

"Ultimately, a Federal Minister for Children would help ensure that children are never an afterthought in policy and decision-making. Their future is in our hands from the day they are born, and they deserve strong representation at the highest levels of government." (Survey respondent)

Survey respondents also highlighted the importance of ensuring that any such role is supported by meaningful authority, adequate resourcing and the ability to influence government decision-making, rather than functioning as a symbolic appointment. Three survey respondents commented:

"The effectiveness of such a role would depend on the Minister being supported by a well-resourced office, strong cross-portfolio coordination mechanisms, and meaningful engagement with children and young people. A title alone is not sufficient; the role must have authority to lead whole-of-government action." (Survey respondent)

"Only if it was done meaningfully - clear portfolio allocation, clear funding and teeth to act with some legislative powers, a long-term investment in funds from the budget, more public awareness of this role." (Survey respondent)

"This role should not be symbolic. It should have Cabinet authority, responsibility for a national children's strategy, clear outcomes and public reporting, and a requirement to respond to advice from the independent National Children's Commissioner. Without a clear point of accountability, children continue to be everyone's responsibility in policy but no one's responsibility when systems fail." (Survey respondent)

Collectively, these responses reflect a strong view among relevant Australian stakeholders that achieving better outcomes for children requires visible national leadership accompanied by clear accountability for progress.

Respondents also repeatedly identified the potential for a Federal Minister for Children to improve coordination across the multiple government portfolios that shape children's lives. Survey responses consistently noted that responsibility for children is currently dispersed across areas such as health, education, housing, child protection, justice, communications and social services, often resulting in fragmented policy development and service delivery. One survey respondent described:

"Australia would benefit from a Federal Minister for Children because responsibility for children's safety, wellbeing and rights is currently fragmented across multiple portfolios. Issues affecting children, including violence, digital safety, education, health, disability, youth justice and family law, sit across different departments, which can lead to gaps, duplication and inconsistent national leadership. A dedicated Minister would provide clear accountability, drive nationally consistent reforms, and ensure children's interests are represented at Cabinet level." (Survey respondent)

As captured in this quote, while children would continue to be relevant to each of these portfolios, the presence of a Minister for Children would provide a much-needed unifying focus on children's needs, helping to improve collaboration across portfolios, reduce policy silos and ensure that children's interests are consistently considered across government decision-making. Two survey respondents commented:

"Responsibilities for protecting the rights of children is pieced across departments and services; having a minister appointed to overseeing the protection of children would be beneficial." (Survey respondent)

"Australia needs a Federal Minister for Children to establish a single point of government accountability, eliminate fragmented policy siloes, and ensure child wellbeing is treated as a distinct national priority." (Survey respondent)

Rather than viewing children's issues through the lens of individual sectors, respondents envisaged a ministerial role that would facilitate more integrated policy responses to the complex and interconnected issues affecting children's safety, wellbeing and development. This was widely regarded as an important mechanism for strengthening national coordination and ensuring greater consistency across jurisdictions.

While support for a Federal Minister for Children was overwhelmingly positive, respondents also emphasised that the effectiveness of such a role would depend on it being accompanied by genuine authority, resourcing and accountability. Rather than creating a symbolic ministerial position, stakeholders argued that the portfolio should have a clearly defined mandate, sufficient funding and the capacity to influence decision-making across government. These responses reflected a shared view that the establishment of a Federal Minister for Children should represent a substantive commitment to advancing children's rights and wellbeing, rather than simply creating an additional layer of government or an office with limited capacity to effect change.

Recommended Action: Re-establish a Federal Minister for Children

The Australian Government should re-establish a dedicated Federal Minister for Children with Cabinet-level responsibility for advancing children's rights, safety and wellbeing and providing national leadership on issues affecting children and young people. The Minister should oversee Australia's implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, coordinate cross-portfolio action across the Commonwealth, champion children's participation in national decision-making, and ensure children's rights and interests are consistently embedded across legislation, policy, funding and service delivery. The Minister should also be responsible for monitoring progress against national commitments affecting children and young people, including the implementation of the Second Action Plan, and overseeing a dedicated stream of funding specific to government efforts to address violence and abuse experienced by children and young people.

Ongoing commitment to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap

The Second Action Plans developed under the National Plan and National Strategy should also embed a commitment to advancing progress on relevant outcomes in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The National Agreement includes 19 socio-economic targets that seeks to positively impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Australian Government, 2020). Accelerating efforts to better prevent, and improve responses to harms against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people will progress numerous outcomes included in the National Agreement, including:

- Outcome 1: Everyone enjoys long and healthy lives;
- Outcome 4: Children thrive in their early years;
- Outcome 5: Students achieve their full learning potential;
- Outcome 7: Youth are engaged in employment and education;
- Outcome 9: People can secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and needs;
- Outcome 11: Young people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system;
- Outcome 12: Children are not overrepresented in the child protection system;
- Outcome 13: Families and households are safe;
- Outcome 17: People have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives.

Achieving these outcomes requires fully funded, sustained and culturally safe reform that is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led. The meaningful inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people as leaders in shaping prevention, recovery and healing responses should be a feature of the newly developed Second Action Plans, reflecting the importance of embedding their lived expertise and self-determination to delivering meaningful and effective change.

Stakeholders emphasised that achieving the Closing the Gap outcomes requires Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership to be embedded throughout policy development, implementation and evaluation, rather than being treated as an additional consideration. These themes were reinforced by survey respondents, who similarly emphasised the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and self-determination in shaping national reform. Two survey respondents commented:

"I think there is a lack of focus on the needs of First Nations Australians, and I feel that there is a lot of "we will do this for you", and not a lot of "we will do this with you". I think this should be a national priority and not state based." (Survey respondent)

"We simply cannot do this without a commitment to first nations led initiatives." (Survey respondent)

Stakeholders also emphasised that commitments under the National Agreement must be accompanied by stronger accountability, with one Commissioner reflecting that:

"If you're going to sign up to Closing the Gap... then they need to make sure... there needs to be something. And the thing is accountability." (CommissionerF)

As captured here, rather than being considered a parallel policy agenda, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap is integral to the successful implementation of the Second Action Plans. Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, partnership and accountability across implementation will be essential to achieving meaningful and sustained improvements in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

Recommended Action: Embed Closing the Gap commitments across the implementation of the Second Action Plans.

The Commonwealth should ensure that implementation of the Second Action Plans is aligned with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap by embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination across all actions affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. This should include sustained investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led initiatives and meaningful partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations, children and young people to design, deliver and evaluate prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing efforts.

Integration of policy efforts

Writing nearly two decades ago in 2008, global expert on child victimisation David Finkelhor observed:

“... we have missed the bigger picture. People have been too intensely focused on particular threats such as sexual abuse, bullying or exposure to domestic violence. This has led to competition for public attention among advocates and scholars who really are concerned about a common problem. This fragmentation has had some unfortunate fallout. It has diminished awareness of the true scope, seriousness, and complexity of child victimization. It has inhibited more systematic and theoretically useful conceptualizations of the problem. It has spawned partial and inadequate policies and response systems.” (Finkelhor, 2008)

This description so clearly captures the impacts of fragmentation in our current responses to different forms of child victimisation and the limits of current policy silos in this area. In addition to the three national policy efforts (the National Plan, the National Strategy, and Safe and Supported) and each of the subsequent first action plans sitting under these, throughout the interviews and focus groups, stakeholders cited many other frameworks that result in a fragmented approach to addressing child victimisation in Australia (on children’s policy fragmentation, see also Australian Child Rights Taskforce, n.d.). This view came through particularly in thoughts shared by the Commissioners that we consulted with, two of whom commented:

“Well, clearly, if child safety and wellbeing was a national priority, let's imagine it was, then those three plans would be would work together. Okay. They would be integrated ... I've been banging on about the 11 (plans) that don't talk to each other. So I would strongly encourage the Second Action Plan to go there to do something about these separate plans. I mean that the plan, the framework for protecting Australia's children, was a waste of space. It should have been a preeminent framework that addressed DFSV experiences as well as child sex abuse ..., it should always have done that, and it did none of that and I'm not sure what it's done actually.” (CommissionerB)

“I think the point of connection between all the plans is children and their families ... The other thing about the plans is a lot of what children and families need isn't in those plans and won't be in those plans. It'll be in other parts of the system, like the mental health stuff, the drug and alcohol stuff, the you know child support stuff ... All of the, a lot of big levers aren't even in those plans, and so we need to say, well, how are these people in these plans going to get that universal services that they really need to get to solve the problems with life? ...” (CommissionerG)

As captured in this quote from a Commissioner, many of the systems that have an opportunity to shape children's safety and wellbeing, including mental health, alcohol and other drugs, education, housing and child protection, sit outside the remit of the National Plan (which sits within the

Department of Social Services, DSS), the National Strategy (which sits within the Attorney General's Department) and Safe and Supported (also within DSS). This reinforces the need for stronger mechanisms to coordinate action across government rather than expecting individual plans to respond to issues beyond their remit.

This fragmentation also creates uncertainty about where responsibility for responding to particular forms of violence should sit. Stakeholders described peer-to-peer sexual violence as one example, noting that adolescent dating violence clearly falls within the scope of the National Plan, while harmful sexual behaviours are addressed under the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse. As a result, responsibility for preventing and responding to adolescent sexual violence can appear dispersed across multiple policy frameworks, despite referring to overlapping forms of harm. For example, one stakeholder reflected:

There is actually a form of sexual violence that's 100% in scope for the national plan, which is adolescent dating violence. So peer-to-peer sexual violence is 100% in scope for the national plan. The idea that they are not trying to stop a 15-year-old boy from sexually assaulting a 15-year-old girl when there's such a focus on respectful relationships and consent education is demonstrably untrue, and that is the form of sexual violence that has doubled in a generation. So, like, it's interesting that they're like, oh, because this area of work doesn't think about a boy sexually abusing a girl as child sexual abuse. And this is an issue, which is you've got like adolescent to adolescent sexual assault, which is articulated in the national strategy's harmful sexual behaviours." (AcademicB)

Such confusion means it is difficult to identify which areas of government are responsible for overseeing actions on which forms of violence and abuse against children and young people. While the National Plan states that: "Experiences of child sexual abuse will be addressed through the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2030," as the example above demonstrates, efforts to prevent peer to peer sexual violence – a form of child sexual abuse - have been advanced under the Plan.

Overlap between policy frameworks is not inherently problematic. Indeed, many forms of child victimisation intersect multiple policy domains and therefore require coordinated responses. However, and reflecting findings in the Blueprint for a National Children's Plan developed by the Australian Child Rights Taskforce, without an overarching mechanism to clarify responsibilities, align implementation and monitor outcomes across government, fragmentation can risk creating duplication in some areas while leaving gaps in others. This can make it difficult to determine who is accountable for driving reform and measuring progress for children and young people.

Stakeholders also reflected on the missed opportunities created by policy responses that continue to address different forms of violence and abuse in isolation. While separate national frameworks have developed around specific forms of harm, stakeholders consistently observed that children's lived experiences rarely fit neatly within these policy boundaries. This is borne out in evidence from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study, which found that one in four Australians experience between three and five different forms of child abuse and violence (Mathews et al., 2023). Australia's policy architecture to address violence against children should better reflect the reality that children's experiences of violence and abuse are often cumulative, interconnected and shaped by experiences across childhood and adolescence. While specialised policy frameworks remain important, stronger mechanisms are needed to ensure that they operate as complementary parts of an integrated national response rather than as separate systems responding to isolated forms of victimisation.

One of the implications of this fragmentation is that there is no consolidated outcomes framework related to children and young people who have experienced violence or abuse. Instead, outcomes are measured separately across individual strategies, portfolios and service systems, making it difficult to assess whether government efforts are collectively improving children's safety, wellbeing and long-term life outcomes. One stakeholder suggested:

“A child outcomes measurement framework that aligns the Plan and Safe and Supported to make sense across would I think be helpful to enable us to track what’s happening and therefore maybe get funding to where it’s needed both in early intervention and in response and I think in the move towards being a victim-survivor in their own right there are very few child appropriate supports out there. They are almost all designed for adults.” (FG6)

Without a shared outcomes framework, governments are limited in their ability to understand whether investments across different policy portfolios are collectively improving outcomes for children and young people or simply measuring activity within individual programs and strategies. Stakeholders noted that success should be measured by improvements in children's safety, wellbeing, recovery, participation and long-term life outcomes, rather than by progress against an individual policy or funding commitment.

Recommended Action: Strengthen integration across national plans and strategies relating to child victimisation as well as children and young people at risk of causing harm

The Australian Government should strengthen integration across the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children, the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse, Safe and Supported, and other relevant national policy frameworks to ensure a more coordinated response to children and young people affected by violence and abuse. This could include:

- Developing a nationally agreed child outcomes measurement framework to monitor children’s safety, wellbeing, recovery and long-term life outcomes across government efforts,
- Clarifying responsibilities and accountabilities for overlapping forms of violence and abuse, including peer to peer sexual violence.

Noting the increasing understanding of the links between victimisation and (while not deterministic) those who cause harm, integration should also include actions that address the use of violence among young people taking an inter-generational approach to domestic, family and sexual violence.

UPHOLDING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS THROUGH THE SECOND ACTION PLAN

Recognising children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right requires more than acknowledging their experiences within policy documents. It requires governments to embed children's rights as a guiding principle throughout the development, implementation and evaluation of the Second Action Plan. Throughout the consultations, some stakeholders noted that children and young people should not simply be recognised as recipients of services, but as rights holders whose safety, participation, recovery and wellbeing should shape policy and decision-making across government. The opportunity here is significant, as reflected in the comments of one survey respondent:

"Australia has an opportunity to lead internationally by showing what it means to put the rights of the child into practice, not only through strategies and statements, but through safe housing, accessible services, child-friendly justice processes, culturally safe support and clear government accountability. Children should not have to become the most serious case in the system before they matter." (Survey respondent)

While stakeholders welcomed the increasing emphasis on listening to children and young people, many questioned whether governments and organisations were consistently translating children's views into meaningful reform. As one survey respondent reflected:

"I think that one thing we sometimes lose from policy or prevention actions is we say that we want to be child focused or child centred, we open up doors for young people to share their experiences, we say we are listening, but in reality are we? Are we actually taking what they are telling us and changing the way we support young people?" (Survey respondent)

This challenge was reflected throughout the consultation findings. Embedding children's rights across the implementation of the Second Action Plan requires moving beyond symbolic commitments towards structural reforms that strengthen accountability, participation and national consistency.

The recommendations that follow seek to embed children's rights into Australia's policy and legislative frameworks, ensuring that children and young people are not only heard but that their rights and experiences consistently shape the decisions, investments and reforms that affect their lives.

Embedding the Rights of the Child into Domestic Law

Throughout the consultations, some stakeholders argued that embedding the rights contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) into Australian domestic law would be a critical part of enabling effective implementation of the Second Action Plan.

While the impacts of this recommended action extend well beyond the domestic, family and sexual violence sector alone, stakeholders described it as fundamental to achieving the National Plan's commitment to recognise children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right. Without a legislative framework requiring governments to actively consider children's rights across policy development, legislation, funding and service design, some stakeholders were of the view that child-centred commitments risk remaining aspirational rather than consistently implemented. As one Commissioner remarked:

"Stop pretending you care about human rights by signing the Convention on the Rights of the Child... stop doing that if you're not going to enact it into domestic legislation and make it law. Because what you're doing is making yourself feel... we don't protect the rights of

the child because we haven't embedded that into legislation... If you embedded these rights into legislation, then it's a must for all jurisdictions, right?" (CommissionerE)

For some stakeholders incorporating the CRC would strengthen implementation of the National Plan by embedding children's rights as a consistent consideration across the development, implementation and evaluation of reforms. While Australia ratified the CRC more than three decades ago, to date, its provisions have not been comprehensively incorporated into Australian domestic law. Stakeholders suggested this contributes to variation across jurisdictions and portfolios and limits accountability for ensuring that children's best interests, safety, participation and wellbeing are embedded in decisions that affect them.

Stakeholders believed that incorporating the CRC into domestic law would establish a stronger legal foundation for child-centred policy and legislative reform. Rather than relying on individual governments or agencies to prioritise children's interests, incorporation of the CRC into domestic law would create an enduring expectation that children's rights are explicitly considered when developing legislation and allocating resources. Stakeholders suggested this would strengthen consistency, transparency and accountability across governments, while reinforcing children's status as rights holders. Support for this reform is demonstrated in the response from a focus group participant:

"We would absolutely want to see incorporation on the Convention on the Rights of the Child into Australian domestic law, just as an overarching thing. That would be great." (FG4)

Importantly, embedding children's rights into domestic law creates enduring legal obligations that outlast individual governments and policy cycles, helping ensure that children's safety, participation and wellbeing are consistently considered across all areas of public policy. In doing so, it would help strengthen implementation of the National Plan and support more sustainable, child-centred reform over the long term.

Recommended Action: Incorporate the Convention on the Rights of the Child into Australian domestic law.

The Commonwealth should work with states and territories to progressively incorporate the rights contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Australian domestic law, ensuring that all legislation, policies and government decision-making affecting children are demonstrably compatible with Australia's obligations under the Convention.

Conditionality of funding

Survey participants expressed overwhelming support for the Commonwealth using its funding agreements with states and territories to strengthen accountability for children's rights. In the survey, participants were asked whether they would support the Commonwealth attaching child-rights conditions to relevant funding agreements with states and territories, including funding for legal assistance, policing, health, housing, education, disability services, and justice reinvestment. Under this approach, state and territory jurisdictions could be required to demonstrate compliance with children's rights obligations in order to receive funding under the relevant agreement. 84 per cent of survey respondents (n=76) supported this action, with only one respondent opposing the proposed action (1 per cent). Stakeholders viewed Commonwealth funding as a strong mechanism available to promote nationally consistent implementation of child rights standards while respecting state and territory responsibility for service delivery.

While only a small number of stakeholders in the interviews and focus groups explicitly discussed attaching conditions to Commonwealth funding agreements, those who did viewed Commonwealth funding as one of the strongest levers available to drive nationally consistent implementation of children's rights. These stakeholders argued that, while service delivery remains primarily the responsibility of states and territories, the Commonwealth has significant capacity to influence implementation through national funding agreements. As one Commissioner explained:

"...they can use that lever, so they could say, well, we're doing the funding agreement on health with you at the moment, and we're doing the funding agreement with you on education... but to be eligible for this, you need to show us what you're doing in the prevention and early intervention and diversion space." (CommissionerE)

Some stakeholders emphasised that children's rights should not remain aspirational principles but should be reflected in implementation and accountability mechanisms. One stakeholder observed that a child-rights approach is:

"not just about signing up to an international accord or document and then making sure that we submit a progress report and tick a box. It's actually about a fundamental way of how you can construct these documents". (SectorExpertP)

Such an approach would provide a practical mechanism for translating Australia's commitments under the Convention on the Rights of the Child into measurable expectations for implementation.

Recommended Action: Use Commonwealth funding agreements to strengthen accountability for children's rights

The Australian Government should attach child-rights conditions to relevant Federal Government agreements and relevant funding agreements with states and territories, including funding for legal assistance, policing, health, housing, education, disability services, and justice reinvestment. Under this approach, state and territory jurisdictions could be required to demonstrate compliance with children's rights obligations to receive funding under the relevant agreement, including to demonstrate that commissioned services within their jurisdictions are also complying with the relevant children's rights obligations.

National Guidelines on the inclusion of children and young people in policy, advocacy and service design

During the consultations, some stakeholders supported the development of nationally consistent guidelines to support the safe, meaningful and ethical participation of children and young people who have experienced violence and abuse in relevant policy development, advocacy and service design. While stakeholders often noted the increasing recognition of children's voices across government and the community sector, there was a concern shared among some that organisations are often inviting children and young people to participate without adequate guidance on how to do so safely. As two consultation participants explained:

"We've seen a huge movement about inclusion of young people's voices, but I have concerns about safety and the way that we're doing that... we need to slow down, in my view, and think a bit more deeply about how we involve young people." (SectorExpertF)

"...there's a huge focus on getting young people to the table, but not necessarily any consideration for how that will impact them or how they will be supported... I just think that needs to be thought through more thoroughly if we're going to engage young people." (Youth AdvocateA)

These two participants argued that meaningful participation requires more than simply creating opportunities for children and young people to be present. Rather, organisations need the capability and policies to ensure participation is safe, supported and genuinely influential.

Stakeholders described a growing tendency to prioritise participation without giving equal consideration to preparation, ongoing support, informed consent, remuneration, cultural safety and the potential impacts on the young person of being asked to repeatedly share their lived experience of violence and abuse. One stakeholder commented:

"I would like to see young people be able to have a seat at the table without necessarily disclosing their lived experience... the youth voice itself... needs to be enough." (SectorExpertF)

This point is an important one, as it points out that children and young people should be valued for their perspectives, ideas and expertise, rather than feeling that they must repeatedly disclose personal experiences of violence in order to be heard or considered credible. In an interview with a sector lead and youth advocate, they identified an opportunity to establish clear national guidelines for engaging children and young people in policy and advocacy processes. This recommended action was subsequently raised and supported in a small number of subsequent interviews and focus groups.

Governments should provide further support for the implementation of these National Guidelines, through workforce capability development, practical resources for children and young people, and accountability mechanisms to ensure the participation of children and young people is genuinely valued rather than treated as a procedural or "tick-box" exercise. Stakeholders emphasised that children and young people should be able to contribute their perspectives without feeling pressure to disclose personal experiences of violence, and that organisations should be supported to create participation processes that are safe, inclusive and responsive to children's diverse needs. These efforts are particularly important given the proliferation of Youth Advisory Groups that have been established in recent years.

These National Guidelines represent an important opportunity to establish consistent expectations for engaging children and young people across governments, non-government organisations and other sectors, while recognising that participation should always be tailored to children's individual circumstances, needs and preferences for engagement. The development of National Guidelines

would support action on Recommendation 2 of the Australian Human Rights Commission (2023, p.64), which stated that each of the relevant national strategies should:

“Directly involve children and young people, particularly those with lived experience, in the design and implementation of policy and services, consistent with the principles in the CRIA⁵ tool. This includes timely and authentic engagement, targeting groups most likely to be impacted by the policy or service, and providing feedback to these groups about how their input has been used.”

The limits of policy and practice reforms that do not embed children’s lived experience was recognised in the Yearly Report of the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission (2025, p. 96) which stated:

“When children and young people are excluded from shaping policy and service design, systems lack critical insights into what makes them feel safe and supported.”

Work to deliver this recommended action should be informed by several of the frameworks that have been delivered in recent years to guide the inclusion of children and young people’s experiences in empowering, safe and ethical ways (see, for example, ACU Institute of Child Protection Studies, 2018; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023; Victorian Commission for Children and Young People, 2025). The Lundy model of child participation, which has been utilised by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2024) among others, also sets out four stages that facilitate meaningful involvement of children in matters that impact them – space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy, 2007; Welty and Lundy, 2013).

Recommended Action: Develop National Guidelines for the Safe and Meaningful Participation of Children and Young People in Policy, Advocacy and Service Design.

The Australian Government should develop, in partnership with children and young people, nationally consistent guidelines that establish minimum standards for the safe, ethical and meaningful participation of children and young people who have experienced violence and abuse in policy development, advocacy and service design. The guidelines should be accompanied by implementation support, workforce training and practical resources to assist governments and relevant organisations to embed child-safe participation practices.

As part of this effort, a child’s voice principle should be embedded within the governance mechanism for the Second Action Plan. Young people themselves should hold roles in the governance arrangements set up to oversee implementation of the Action Plan, with responsibility included for assessing whether strategic priorities are being delivered upon. This would support, and ensure, the centring of the voices of young people themselves, including First Nations children and young people. Article 12, of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989) embeds a child’s right to be heard in all matters affecting them, and for these views to be given “due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (also referred to as the right to participate, see Australian Human Rights Commission, 2025). Throughout the consultations, several stakeholders, including youth advocates, discussed the need for children and young people to not only be consulted during the development of policies that affect them, but also to play an ongoing role in overseeing their implementation and evaluating whether governments are delivering on their commitments.

⁵ CRIA refers to a Child Rights Impact Assessment tool, which the Australian Human Rights Commission (2023) recommended be used by all government departments to embed child rights and interests in policy making processes.

Recommended Action: Establish child and young person representation within the governance arrangements for the Second Action Plan.

The Australian Government should embed a child participation principle within the governance arrangements for the Second Action Plan by ensuring that children and young people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, are meaningfully represented in implementation, oversight and review mechanisms. These governance arrangements should provide genuine opportunities for children and young people to inform priorities, monitor progress, contribute to decision-making and assess whether governments are delivering on their commitments. To facilitate transparent accountability, government should publicly report on how children and young people's views have been taken into account in the relevant decisions under the Second Action Plan.

A youth-friendly version of the Second Action Plan

Throughout the consultations, stakeholders consistently emphasised the importance of ensuring that children and young people are not only consulted during the development of the Second Action Plan but are also able to understand the commitments governments make on their behalf. The National Plan and associated Action Plans are lengthy policy documents written primarily for governments, policymakers and sector stakeholders. This limits their accessibility for the children and young people whose lives they seek to improve.

Developing a youth-friendly version of each Second Action Plan would demonstrate a practical commitment to children's participation rights under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Accessible versions of the Action Plans would enable children and young people to understand the government's priorities, recognise how their voices have influenced reform, and hold governments accountable for delivering on their commitments. Making policy accessible to children is an important component of meaningful participation, ensuring that engagement extends beyond consultation to ongoing transparency and accountability.

A youth-friendly Action Plan could be developed in partnership with children and young people and disseminated through youth advisory groups, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, youth services, advocacy organisations and other settings where children and young people engage. This would support broader awareness of the reforms while creating opportunities for ongoing dialogue with children and young people throughout implementation, reinforcing that they are partners in shaping Australia's response to violence against children.

Recommended Action: Develop a youth-friendly version of the Second Action Plan

The Australian Government should develop and publish a youth-friendly version of the Second Action Plans under both the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children and the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse. These documents should be co-designed with children and young people and presented in accessible, age-appropriate language and formats. The youth-friendly Action Plans should clearly explain the commitments governments have made, how children and young people's views informed the plans, how progress will be monitored and how children and young people can provide feedback on the implementation of the Second Action Plans to facilitate their ongoing participation in government's efforts to better address child victimisation.

*“You can get failed by your mum and dad,
and you can get failed by systems ...
We need the government and people just to realise ...
they can do this ...
most kids don’t get heard and listened to.”*

(Ivy, 16-year-old female, First Nations, experienced violence from age 3, cited in StudyA)

*“So many kids are in abuse and they have in their entire life,
and no one is helping ... they never listen.
I know so many people that have been through DV,
and then they’ve just been put out on their asses ...
I hate it ... there’s nothing.
There’s no help.”*

(Levi, 16-year-old male, experienced violence from birth, cited in StudyA)

CONCLUSION: THE POLITICAL WILL TO ACT FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

This consultation has brought together the perspectives of more than 200 stakeholders from across Australia to identify the actions needed under the Second Action Plan to better prevent, identify and respond to violence and abuse experienced by children and young people.

While stakeholders acknowledged important progress over recent years, particularly in recognising children as victim-survivors in their own right, the overwhelming message throughout the consultation was that more action is needed. The challenge is no longer identifying what children need; it is implementing those solutions consistently, at scale, and with the sustained investment required to meaningfully reduce child victimisation across Australia. In the survey, two stakeholders commented:

“The current system is broken. It is a human right for children to be safe.” (Survey respondent)

“This is preventable. Choosing to do nothing is choosing to enable child abuse.” (Survey respondent)

Ultimately, this report asks a simple question of governments: If Australia is committed to ending gender-based violence in one generation, are we prepared to invest in the children whose lives, safety and futures will determine whether that ambition is realised? The Second Action Plan presents a rare opportunity to move beyond recognising children as victim-survivors in their own right and towards building a whole of system response, policy framework and accountability architecture that genuinely reflects that recognition.

This consultation report should not be read in isolation of wider efforts. Rather, it sits alongside decades of Royal Commissions, Parliamentary Inquiries, Coronial Inquests, Child Death Reviews, government reviews and research studies, including the Australian Child Maltreatment Study, which together demonstrate both the scale of children's experiences of violence and abuse and the urgent need for action. Children and young people cannot afford another five years in which recognition continues to outpace implementation.

Throughout this consultation, stakeholders returned repeatedly to a single conclusion: Australia has the evidence and the policy solutions required to significantly improve outcomes for children and young people who experience violence and abuse. What is now required is the political will to act. The Second Action Plan presents an opportunity to demonstrate that governments are prepared to match the strength of the evidence with the strength of their commitment – both from a financial and legislative perspective. With several action plans relevant to children and young people now being developed, together with a second term Federal Government who were re-elected convincingly at the last election, there is a unique and perhaps once in a generation window to take the profound action that is needed.

Within the context of a National Plan that seeks to end gender-based violence in one generation, many stakeholders reflected that this ambition will not be realised unless Australia invests much earlier in children's lives. When asked what their one message to the federal government on behalf of children would be, a number of survey respondents emphasised the critical opportunity of intervening in early years to drive change and better life outcomes over the life course:

“Early years are the most crucial in a person's development. Children absorb all that is around them, seeing, hearing, sensing. This is the most crucial time to make long term impact. Domestic violence is generational and unless intervention is occurring early, we are

accepting a future where domestic violence continues to exist and intensify.” (Survey respondent)

“Children are our future. Invest early, listen to their voices, and give every child the opportunity to be safe, recover and thrive.” (Survey respondent)

“Protect children who are having these adverse experiences today to create more safety and support for them and future children/ generations.” (Survey respondent)

Throughout the consultation, stakeholders repeatedly challenged the assumption that investment in children represents an additional cost. Instead, stakeholders described investment in children's safety, recovery and wellbeing as one of the most effective long-term investments governments can make. Responding early improves children's immediate safety while also reducing future demand across health, mental health, education, child protection, justice, housing and social service systems. Stakeholders commented:

“Investing in our children's lived experiences of their rights, is the surest way to strengthen Australia's future.” (Survey respondent)

“You hold the key to changing not just the lives of these children, but also the generations to come. This will cost you a lot less money in the long run.” (Survey respondent)

“These children and young people are our future and if we don't invest, we will bear the decision of that, our health and prosperity of our country will be impacted.” (Survey respondent)

Stakeholders consistently emphasised the urgency of action. The Second Action Plan was viewed as a critical opportunity to translate the evidence based into much needed action. As one survey respondent reflected:

“We must act now. There is an urgent crisis and there is the know-how and expertise in Australia to make it happen. In order to do that, you must listen including to the voice of children and young people from all communities and backgrounds, invest long-term, not politicise and be ready to have a frank look in the mirror.” (Survey respondent)

But there was an appreciation that timely action will only come if there is political will to support it. On this, one survey respondent commented:

“My hope comes from knowing that the solutions are not beyond our reach. The challenge is not understanding what children need, it is finding the collective will to invest in it, prioritise it and sustain it over the long term.” (Survey respondent)

Given the profound benefits of acting on this issue, for children, families and communities, the consultation findings point to an overwhelming case for governments to act on the solutions identified throughout this report. The importance of acting now was perhaps best captured by one survey respondent, on whose words we conclude this report:

“Every child has the right to safety and the right to thrive. If we get this right, we can increase future safety and hopefully support healing and recovery. It will have a positive ongoing ripple effect across all sectors including, education, health and mental health, the justice system, employment and welfare systems.” (Survey respondent)

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APPENDIX A: ACTIONS INCLUDED FOR RANKING IN THE SURVEY

Actions relevant to the prevention pillar

- Develop Australia's first National Framework for the Prevention of Violence against Children.
- Commit to investment in First Nations led, self-determined prevention strategies initiatives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, that address the structural drivers of violence affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.
- Strengthen digital safety and online harm prevention for children and young people, including targeted education related to technology facilitated abuse, image-based abuse, and digital coercive control.
- Updates school-based initiatives (including Respectful Relationships Education, RRE) and other youth-focused prevention efforts to reflect young people's lived experiences including their online lives and experiences of coercive control.
- Develop a youth-centric prevention campaign, focused on inclusion of child-centred content addressing the cycle of intergenerational violence.
- Support parents and caregivers with evidence-based prevention and early parenting programs, including programs targeted to key developmental transition points (pregnancy, early childhood, adolescence) to address problematic behaviours and to reduce intergenerational cycles of violence.
- Establish a national research, evaluation and outcomes framework on the prevention of violence against children, including longitudinal research that tracks attitudinal, behavioural and safety outcomes for children and young people over time.
- Implement a nationally consistent child safeguarding framework across all organisations working with children.
- Invest in peer-led prevention initiatives that equip children and young people with the confidence and skills to safely intervene, support friends and challenge harmful attitudes and behaviours.
- Embed violence prevention within universal childhood settings, including early childhood education, schools, sporting organisations and youth services, to ensure prevention reaches children across a range of settings.

Actions relevant to the early intervention pillar

- Develop and embed child-inclusive domestic and family violence risk assessment and management practices, including safety planning, across universal services
- Strengthen workforce capability across education settings to identify and respond safely to disclosures of violence or abuse in schools.
- Build workforce capability to identify, assess and manage risk across universal services, including maternal and child health, early childhood education and care, schools and primary health.
- Develop and deliver evidence-based early intervention programs that equip adolescent boys with the motivation, confidence and practical skills needed to safely and effectively challenge unsafe, sexist or disrespectful behaviours among their peers.
- Develop new early intervention programs targeting 16- to 24-year-olds in further or higher education settings, and other community settings, including workplaces.
- Embed trauma-informed early intervention responses in youth justice and diversion programs in recognition of the strong overlap between experiences of child victimisation, trauma and justice system involvement
- Embed holistic wellbeing supports within educational settings, including counsellors, social workers, speech pathologists and occupational therapists, to strengthen early identification of risk and provision of early supports.

- Strengthen culturally safe, First Nations led early intervention initiatives that support families experiencing violence or adversity and reduce statutory child protection and justice system involvement for First Nations children and young people
- Develop national digital early intervention and help-seeking initiatives that engage children and young people through online platforms.
- Improve help seeking by developing child-specific, anonymous and digitally accessible disclosure and reporting pathways, including through schools and trusted online platforms.
- Establish national practice guidance to provide clarity regarding when parental consent is needed and when it is not with the aim of improving responses to help seeking among young victim-survivors.
- Improve coordinated responses to children at risk by strengthening information sharing between child protection, family violence, police, health and family law systems.
- Establish nationally consistent minimum workforce capability standards for professionals working with children experiencing violence.
- Strengthen parents' and caregivers' capability to recognise early indicators of domestic, family and sexual violence and respond safely to children's disclosures and help-seeking.
- Improve the early identification of children experiencing violence by strengthening data linkage, referral pathways and proactive follow-up across universal services.

Actions relevant to the response pillar

- Establish a dedicated specialist domestic and family violence service for children and young people in each state and territory.
- Embed education supports into crisis accommodation, including refuges and other safe housing initiatives, in order to maintain learning continuity.
- Implement nationally consistent child-specific risk assessment and safety planning approaches that recognise children as victim-survivors in their own right.
- Expand the availability and accessibility of youth-specific crisis and transitional accommodation options for young people experiencing violence who seek help without a protective parent (often referred to as unaccompanied minors).
- Develop a national best-practice framework for responding to disclosures of domestic, family and sexual violence for schools, taking into account existing laws, information sharing legislation and reporting obligations in each state and territory.
- Build workforce capability across schools, health services, policing and community services, to ensure frontline practitioners are able to better identify, assess and manage risk, to respond to disclosures in a child-centred manner, and to take evidence-based steps to support safety, to address perpetration and to prevent further harm.
- Strengthen child-centred safety responses in post-separation contexts, including improved risk assessment and management practice and information sharing between family law courts, child protection, police, schools and specialist services,
- Implement developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed justice processes that minimise retraumatisation and support the safety, participation and wellbeing of child victim-survivors.
- Establish specialist justice system navigators roles to support children and young people who have experienced violence or abuse to safely engage with police and courts.
- Expand therapeutic, restorative and diversionary responses for children and young people who have used family violence or problematic sexual behaviours who are subject to or at risk of intervention orders with the aim of preventing further harm and reducing criminal justice involvement.
- Monitor and publicly report on unmet demand for domestic, family and sexual violence services for children and young people, including through nationally agreed performance measure and reporting on targets at the state, territory and federal level.
- Strengthen protection order systems to ensure children's safety, rights and protection needs are consistently recognised and prioritised.

Actions relevant to the recovery and healing pillar

- Build a nationally consistent child and youth centred recovery and healing system for child who have experienced violence or abuse, ensuring timely access to trauma-informed culturally safe and flexible supports including for young people who may lack stable housing, digital access, or protective parent.
- Ensure children and young people experiencing violence or abuse have access to long-term therapeutic, mental health and wellbeing supports that extend beyond the point of crisis and are responsive to changing needs over time.
- Embed children's participation, agency and choice into recovery and healing planning, including through access to independent advocacy where required.
- Provide sustained, self-determined funding for culturally safe healing and recovery services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who have experienced violence or abuse, including by recognising healing as a collective, intergenerational and long-term process
- Position education settings as a priority site for recovery and healing by strengthening trauma-informed school responses and ensuring children and young people who have experienced violence receive coordinated educational, wellbeing and re-engagement supports.
- Develop nationally consistent transition and recovery pathways for young people moving into adulthood following experiences of violence or abuse, including those leaving out-of-home care, refuges, crisis accommodation and other service systems.
- Expand access to safe, stable housing and integrated wrap-around supports, including Youth Foyers, transitional housing and specialist accommodation, as a foundation for recovery and healing.
- Embed children's and young people's lived expertise across national policy, service design, implementation and evaluation through permanent mechanisms for participation, co-design and accountability.

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