

KIDS FIRST AUSTRALIA

Second Action Plan consultation

Submission to inform the Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032

Prepared by Kids First Australia

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Purpose

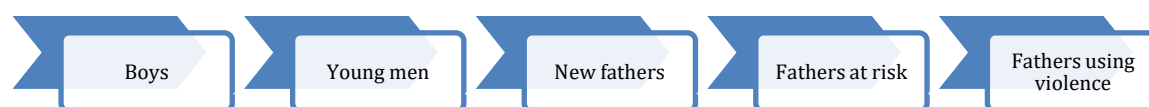
Kids First Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032.

Kids First believes violence prevention, accountability and recovery should be understood through a developmental and life-course lens, with children's rights, family relationships and key developmental transitions shaping the design of policy and service responses.

Violence against women and children is a complex social issue that requires more than individual programs or isolated service responses. Lasting change depends on a coordinated system that connects prevention, early intervention, accountability, recovery and healing across the life course. While Australia has made significant progress in building specialist responses, opportunities remain to better integrate these investments, strengthen early intervention and ensure children's safety and wellbeing remain visible across all parts of the system.

Kids First is a child and family services organisation with experience across early childhood, family services, family violence, sexual abuse counselling and prevention, youth services, and interventions for fathers who have used violence. Our response is informed by more than a decade of work across prevention, early intervention and behaviour change, including our delivery and national leadership of Caring Dads and its catalogue of prevention and behavioural intervention programs that engages boys and men at developmentally significant moments across the life course (as depicted in the graphic below).

Prevention continuum



Kids First's experience suggests that effective violence prevention and behaviour change require a life-course approach that engages boys and men at key transition points across childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, fatherhood and family life. These transition points create unique opportunities to influence identity, relationships, help-seeking, caregiving behaviours and accountability before harmful patterns become entrenched. Australia's prevention and intervention systems should be designed around these developmental opportunities rather than operating as a series of disconnected responses.

Through this work we have observed that children's outcomes, family safety and long-term behaviour change are strengthened when responses are connected rather than fragmented; when boys and fathers are engaged earlier; when accountability is paired with support; and when interventions are designed around the lived experiences of children and victim-survivors.

Our submission is guided by five system-level propositions:

1. Children and young people should be recognised as victim-survivors in their own right across prevention, response, recovery and accountability systems.
2. The first 1001 days should be recognised as a critical violence-prevention and child-development window. Governments should invest in integrated early-help systems that combine early education, family support, parent capability building and relational approaches to strengthen the conditions that protect children and families before violence, neglect or developmental vulnerability escalate.
3. Prevention efforts should engage fathers earlier and recognise fatherhood as a significant opportunity to influence attitudes, relationships and behaviour across the life course.
4. People who use violence require a continuum of responses that combines accountability, behaviour change, partner safety, child-centred practice and coordinated system oversight.
5. Governments should invest not only in programs, but in the implementation infrastructure, workforce capability, evaluation and service integration required to deliver evidence-informed interventions safely and effectively at scale.

The experience of Caring Dads demonstrates many of these principles in practice.

While no single program can address family violence on its own, Caring Dads provides valuable insight into how father engagement, child-centred accountability, partner safety and coordinated service responses can work together to support safer outcomes for women and children. These lessons have broader relevance for the design and implementation of the Second Action Plan.

Kids First's experience further demonstrates that effective prevention begins long before violence becomes visible. Through Kids First's integrated Early Help model and evidence-informed early years practice, we have observed that strengthening parent-child relationships, parental confidence, attachment and family functioning during the first 1,001 critical days of a baby's life creates important protective factors for children's wellbeing and long-term development. A well-functioning service system should support families across the life-course continuum, providing coordinated support before risk emerges, when concerns first become evident, and when more intensive interventions are required. We believe integrated Early Help should be recognised as core violence-prevention infrastructure, sitting alongside specialist family violence responses within the National Plan.

Survey question 1

Prevention

What actions can governments, workplaces, industries, schools, families and individuals take to stop violence before it starts?

Prevention cannot be understood as a single intervention or awareness campaign. Violence against women and children emerges through complex interactions between individual, relational, community and structural factors over time. Effective prevention therefore requires a coordinated, life-course

approach that strengthens the conditions for healthy child development, respectful relationships, family wellbeing and community connection before violence occurs.

The Second Action Plan provides an opportunity to expand Australia's prevention focus beyond addressing harmful attitudes alone and towards building the developmental and relational foundations that protect children and families across the life course. This begins in the first 1,001 days including conception, where it is known that women are at greater risk of experiencing violence from an intimate partner during pregnancy. It is during these first 1,001 days when attachment, emotional regulation and family relationships are being established, and continues through key developmental transitions including adolescence, young adulthood and the transition to fatherhood. Prevention efforts should be a well that different opportunities for engagement and influence emerge during childhood, adolescence, young adulthood and the transition to parenthood.

Kids First's experience suggests that violence prevention is most effective when it is embedded within the places where children and families already live, learn and connect. Universal services, such as maternal and child health, early childhood education and care, schools and community-based family services, play a critical role in strengthening protective factors, identifying concerns early and connecting families with support before risks escalate.

Kids First recommends that governments:

Recognise integrated Early Help as a national prevention strategy by investing in models that combine early childhood education, maternal and child health, parenting support and family services to strengthen family wellbeing before risks escalate.

Recognise violence prevention as a life-course responsibility that begins in childhood and continues through adolescence, young adulthood, the transition to parenthood and family formation. Prevention efforts should be designed as a connected system rather than a collection of standalone initiatives.

Position fatherhood more centrally within Australia's prevention agenda by recognising the transition to fatherhood as a significant opportunity to influence attitudes, relationships, emotional regulation, help-seeking and caregiving behaviours before harmful patterns become entrenched.

Make the first 1,001 days a core component of national family violence prevention, including support during pregnancy, infancy and the transition to parenting.

Invest in evidence-informed approaches that engage boys, young men, new fathers and fathers at different points across the prevention continuum.

Embed prevention and early intervention in trusted universal settings, including maternal and child health, early childhood education and care, schools and family services.

Equip universal services to engage fathers as parents and caregivers, recognise early indicators of coercive control and family violence, and connect families with support before risk escalates.

Sustain respectful relationships and consent education that responds to online misogyny, technology-facilitated abuse and harmful gender norms in age-appropriate ways.

Fund community-led and culturally safe prevention approaches, particularly those designed and delivered by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

Kids First experience

Our experience suggests that prevention efforts are most effective when they recognise that different intervention opportunities emerge at different stages of life.

Prevention starts with boys and young men. Programs such as Boys to Adolescence and To Future Me support the development of respectful relationships, emotional literacy, consent awareness and healthy understandings of gender and identity.

Prevention strengthens during the transition to fatherhood. Fatherhood is one of the most significant identity shifts in a man's life and creates a unique period of motivation, reflection and openness to change. Through our work with fathers, we consistently observe that men who may resist conversations about violence, accountability or personal behaviour are often willing to engage in conversations about what kind of father they want to be.

For this reason, fatherhood should not be viewed solely as a service context. It should be recognised as a prevention opportunity in its own right.

Kids First's Being Dads program has been designed around this insight. The program supports young fathers aged 16-24, and separately fathers aged 25+ years, to develop safe, nurturing and equitable approaches to parenting, relationships and co-parenting before harmful patterns become established.

Being Dads sits within the Caring Dads catalogue as part of a broader continuum of father-focused interventions. Together they demonstrate how Australia can engage males at different points across the prevention and intervention spectrum: from shaping attitudes in adolescence, through identity formation during the transition to fatherhood, to supporting accountability and behaviour change when violence has occurred.

However, prevention is not limited to attitudes and behaviours. It also involves strengthening the relational and developmental conditions that support safe families and healthy child development.

Evidence from developmental science demonstrates that the first 1001 days are a critical period in which attachment, emotional regulation, stress buffering and caregiving relationships shape developmental trajectories. International evidence increasingly recognises that integrated approaches combining family support, early learning and parenting capability building can strengthen outcomes for children while reducing risks associated with adversity and family dysfunction.

Through its Early Help model, Kids First has translated evidence from the Early Years Education Program into an integrated service approach that combines early education, family support and relational practice. The model demonstrates how strengthening parent-child relationships, parental confidence and family functioning can act as both a developmental intervention and an early prevention strategy.

Services and support

How can services and supports work better for people who have experienced, or are at risk of experiencing, family, domestic or sexual violence?

While prevention is critical, prevention alone will not eliminate family violence. The Second Action Plan must also strengthen the systems that respond when risk emerges. Too often families encounter fragmented responses, multiple assessments, inconsistent risk management and disconnected service pathways. Victim-survivors should not be expected to navigate complex systems while managing safety concerns and trauma. An effective system requires coordination around families, clear accountability and shared responsibility across services.

Australia has invested significantly in specialist responses, but comparatively less in the infrastructure required to identify vulnerability early and provide coordinated support before problems escalate. The Second Action Plan provides an opportunity to establish a nationally consistent Early Help approach that connects universal, targeted and specialist services around the needs of children and families.

Kids First recommends that governments:

Create a genuinely integrated family safety system that connects specialist family violence, child and family services, health, education, housing, justice, mental health and alcohol and other drug services through shared responsibility for outcomes.

Establish a National Early Help Strategy focused on the first 1001 days, supported by integrated local Early Help Hubs that bring together early childhood education, maternal and child health, parenting support, family services and specialist supports around the needs of children and families. Integrated Early Help should be recognised as a core component of Australia's violence-prevention, child-development and family wellbeing infrastructure.

Develop a shared national Early Help outcomes framework, measuring child wellbeing, attachment, parental confidence, family functioning, developmental progress and service integration outcomes across the first 1001 days.

Move beyond crisis-oriented responses by investing in sustained early-help and recovery pathways that support families before risk escalates and after immediate crisis has passed.

Reduce fragmentation through clearer referral pathways, warm referrals, safe information sharing and coordinated case management across services.

Strengthen multi-agency responses that keep the person using violence visible and accountable while supporting the safety and wellbeing of women and children.

Invest in specialist practice leadership, workforce capability, supervision and reflective practice to support consistent, evidence-informed responses across both specialist and universal services.

Commission interventions as complete service models rather than isolated program activities, recognising the importance of risk assessment, partner support, case coordination, fidelity and evaluation.

Kids First experience

Kids First's experience across early years, family services, youth services and family violence responses suggests that outcomes for women and children improve when services operate as part of a coordinated system rather than as standalone interventions. Families affected by violence frequently

experience intersecting challenges including housing instability, mental ill health, substance use, child protection involvement, family law disputes and social isolation. Responses that address these issues separately often create complexity rather than safety.

Our experience demonstrates that behaviour change interventions are most effective when delivered as part of an integrated system response. Effective approaches combine perpetrator intervention with partner support, child-focused practice, coordinated risk management and collaboration across child protection, family violence, justice, health and community services.

Caring Dads provides an example of this systems approach in practice. While commonly perceived as a fathering program, its effectiveness relies on a broader intervention architecture that includes systematic mother contact, risk assessment, therapeutic case management, cross-agency coordination and ongoing safety monitoring. The program demonstrates that outcomes are not produced by group work alone, but by the interaction between multiple parts of the service system.

This experience highlights a broader policy lesson for the Second Action Plan: governments should invest not only in service delivery, but in the infrastructure that enables services to work together effectively, including referral pathways, practice leadership, workforce capability, data sharing, evaluation and implementation support.

Kids First's Early Help model demonstrates the benefits of integrating family support and early childhood education within a single service system. Rather than treating developmental, parenting and family challenges separately, the model aligns educators, family support practitioners and parents around a shared developmental framework. Evaluation has identified improved parental confidence, help seeking behaviours, family engagement and child wellbeing, reinforcing the value of integrated service responses that address complexity before statutory intervention becomes necessary.

The broader policy lesson is that families should not need to wait until violence, statutory involvement or significant developmental vulnerability emerges before coordinated support becomes available. Integrated Early Help demonstrates how universal and targeted services can be aligned around child development, family wellbeing and relational safety, creating opportunities to address risk factors earlier and reduce demand on more intensive service systems over time.

The broader lesson is that families should not need to wait until violence, statutory involvement or significant developmental vulnerability emerges before coordinated support becomes available. Integrated Early Help demonstrates how universal and targeted supports can be combined to strengthen family functioning, reduce risk factors and improve child outcomes before more intensive interventions become necessary.

Survey question 3

How can communities and services best support children and young people to stay safe from violence?

Australia will not end violence against women and children unless children are recognised as victim-survivors in their own right and become a primary measure of system success.

Children experience family violence directly, indirectly and developmentally. Yet children's experiences are often assessed through the lens of adult outcomes rather than their own safety, wellbeing, rights and recovery. The Second Action Plan presents an opportunity to move beyond viewing children as witnesses to violence and instead recognise them as victim-survivors in their own right. This approach is consistent with Australia's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognises children's rights to protection from violence, to have their best interests treated as a primary consideration, and to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives. These principles should be visible across prevention, service design, accountability measures, recovery responses and evaluation frameworks.

Children's safety must be understood not only as protection from immediate harm but also as the presence of stable, nurturing relationships that support attachment, emotional regulation and healthy development. Developmental evidence demonstrates that learning, wellbeing and resilience are shaped through relationships long before formal education begins. Policies intended to support children affected by violence should therefore consider both protection and developmental recovery.

Kids First recommends that governments:

Recognise children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, with their safety, wellbeing, developmental outcomes, participation rights and lived experiences visible across prevention, response, recovery and accountability systems. This reflects Australia's commitment to upholding children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Apply a Child Rights framework across implementation of the National Plan, ensuring that policy, funding, program design, service delivery and evaluation are assessed against their contribution to children's safety, wellbeing, participation and development.

Ensure children and young people can safely participate in the design, delivery and evaluation of policies and services that affect them, consistent with their right to express views on matters affecting them and to have those views given due weight according to their age and maturity.

Require the National Plan and its Action Plans to report against child-centred outcomes, including safety, wellbeing, participation, developmental progress, attachment and recovery, so that children's experiences become a core measure of system performance.

Require all family violence responses to consider the individual experience, safety and developmental needs of each child, recognising that children within the same family may experience violence differently.

Strengthen child-centred outcomes measurement across the National Plan, including indicators relating to safety, wellbeing, emotional functioning, attachment, recovery and participation, rather than relying solely on adult-focused outcomes.

Promote positive father engagement as a protective factor for children while maintaining a clear focus on accountability and victim-survivor safety. Safe, nurturing and accountable fathers contribute to

improved child wellbeing, stronger family relationships and reduced intergenerational transmission of violence.

Develop developmentally appropriate responses for young people who use violence in the home or intimate relationships, combining accountability, safety and opportunities for change.

Require interventions for people who use violence, particularly fathers, to explicitly address the impact of violence, abuse and coercive control on children's experiences, wellbeing and development.

Kids First experience

A key lesson from Kids First's work is that children's safety cannot be separated from the behaviour of the adults around them. Interventions that focus exclusively on either victim support or perpetrator accountability risk overlooking the lived experience of children and the ways violence continues to shape their relationships, development and sense of safety.

Emerging international evidence highlights a significant gap in understanding how interventions for fathers who use violence affect children. A recent international review identified only four eligible studies examining child outcomes despite screening more than 4,400 studies, demonstrating how frequently children remain invisible within evaluation frameworks.

Caring Dads was developed to address this gap by placing children's experiences at the centre of behaviour change efforts. The program asks fathers to understand violence through the eyes of their children, recognise the impact of their behaviour on child wellbeing and take responsibility for the harm caused. In our experience, children's experiences often become one of the most powerful mechanisms for engagement, accountability and sustained behaviour change among fathers.

The broader policy lesson is that children should not simply be recipients of recovery support after violence has occurred. They should be visible throughout the entire system, informing prevention strategies, shaping intervention design, influencing accountability responses and becoming a central measure of whether the National Plan is succeeding.

A child-centred approach is not simply a service-delivery choice. It is a rights-based obligation and a measure of system effectiveness. A National Plan that genuinely aims to end violence against women and children should be able to demonstrate not only reductions in violence, but improvements in children's safety, wellbeing, participation, development and lifelong outcomes. Children should not be invisible beneficiaries of the system; they should be recognised as rights-holders for whom the system is ultimately designed.

People who use violence

What more can be done across the community to promote healthy, safe relationships and strengthen accountability for people who use violence?

Building a national accountability and behaviour-change system

Ending violence against women and children requires more than crisis response and victim-survivor support. It requires a coherent and evidence-informed system of accountability and behaviour change for people who use violence. While safety for women and children must remain paramount, the National Plan should also recognise that accountability and change are not competing objectives. Effective systems create pathways through which people who use violence are held accountable for their behaviour, supported to change, and subject to ongoing risk management and oversight.

Family violence responses should move beyond a binary distinction between prevention and crisis intervention. Governments should build a life-course continuum that engages boys and young men early, supports fathers during key developmental transitions, identifies harmful behaviours before violence escalates, and provides intensive interventions when safety concerns emerge.

Kids First recommends that governments:

Build a national life-course continuum of accountability and behaviour-change responses spanning prevention, early intervention, perpetrator intervention and longer-term monitoring and support.

Recognise fatherhood as a significant engagement and behaviour-change opportunity within the National Plan while maintaining a clear focus on victim-survivor safety and perpetrator accountability.

Embed a developmental, life-course framework within future Action Plans under the National Plan to ensure prevention, early intervention, accountability and recovery investments are connected across childhood, adolescence, adulthood and parenthood.

Commission interventions as complete service models rather than standalone programs, recognising the importance of partner support, risk assessment, case coordination, fidelity monitoring, workforce capability and evaluation.

Strengthen integration between perpetrator interventions, family violence services, child protection, family law, justice, housing, mental health and alcohol and other drug systems.

Require interventions to explicitly address the impact of violence on children, parenting and co-parenting, rather than focusing solely on adult intimate relationships.

Develop shared national outcome measures that assess changes in safety, parenting, child wellbeing, co-parenting, accountability and behavioural patterns, rather than relying primarily on participation or completion rates.

Invest in implementation infrastructure, including workforce development, fidelity governance, adaptation frameworks, outcome measurement and continuous improvement systems.

Kids First's experience

Over the past decade, Kids First has worked across prevention, early intervention and behaviour-change responses for boys, young men and fathers. One of the strongest lessons from this work is that behaviour change is fundamentally an identity process, not simply a skills process.

Many interventions successfully teach communication skills, emotional regulation and parenting techniques. While these capabilities are important, lasting change occurs when men begin to see themselves differently, including as safe, accountable and emotionally available fathers. Through our work we consistently observe that men who may resist conversations about violence often engage more readily in conversations about their children and the type of father they want to be. Fatherhood can therefore provide a powerful pathway to accountability and change.

Caring Dads demonstrates these principles in practice. Importantly, the program should not be understood as a fathering program alone, but as a child-centred accountability intervention. The model combines behaviour-change work with partner contact, risk assessment, therapeutic case management, child-focused practice and coordinated engagement with the broader service system. Our experience suggests that these surrounding components are as important as the group intervention itself. Outcomes are produced not by a curriculum alone, but through the interaction between accountability, safety planning, workforce capability and coordinated service responses.

International evidence increasingly recognises the value of engaging fathers within violence intervention efforts, but significant evidence gaps remain regarding child outcomes. A recent international review identified only four studies globally that examined child outcomes arising from interventions for fathers who use violence. This highlights the importance of embedding child-centred outcome measurement and national evaluation frameworks within future policy development.

The policy challenge for the Second Action Plan is not simply to increase the availability of perpetrator interventions. It is to build a system in which accountability, behaviour change, child safety and victim-survivor wellbeing are pursued together. Caring Dads demonstrates that father engagement, child-centred accountability, partner safety and coordinated service responses can operate as complementary components of a single intervention approach. These principles have relevance beyond any one program and should inform the broader design of Australia's accountability and behaviour-change system.

Recovery and healing

What would make the biggest difference in helping people and families to recover and heal after being affected by family, domestic or sexual violence?

Recovery from family violence is not a single event but a long-term developmental process. While immediate safety is essential, recovery also requires sustained investment in healing, wellbeing, relationships, community connection and life opportunities. The Second Action Plan should recognise recovery as a system responsibility that extends beyond crisis response and supports women, children and families to rebuild safety, stability and hope over time.

For children in particular, recovery should be understood through a developmental lens. Experiences of violence can affect attachment, emotional regulation, learning, relationships and future wellbeing throughout the life course. The impacts of violence can begin before birth and during the first 1001 days, when the foundations for attachment, emotional regulation, brain development and relational safety are being established. Recovery responses should therefore recognise that healing looks different at different developmental stages and must support children and families across the life course.

Recovery systems should therefore focus not only on responding to harm, but also on creating the conditions that enable children and families to thrive.

Recovery should be understood as part of a broader life-course continuum, recognising that the impacts of violence, and opportunities for healing, differ across infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Evidence suggests that healing occurs most effectively when children experience safe, stable and nurturing relationships that support emotional regulation, learning and resilience. Integrated early years approaches demonstrate that family support, relational practice and child development are mutually reinforcing and should not be treated as separate policy domains.

Kids First recommends that governments:

Fund recovery and healing as a long-term process rather than ending support when immediate risk or statutory involvement has reduced.

Ensure children and young people can access timely, developmentally appropriate therapeutic, educational and wellbeing supports that recognise them as victim-survivors in their own right .

Recognise infancy and the first 1001 days as a priority period for recovery and healing, ensuring that infants, parents and caregivers can access relationship-based supports that strengthen attachment, parental wellbeing and child development following experiences of violence, trauma or adversity.

Support women and children to maintain safe connections to home, school, early learning, culture and community wherever possible, recognising the importance of continuity and belonging in recovery.

Measure recovery through meaningful long-term outcomes, including safety, wellbeing, developmental progress, participation, educational engagement, connection to culture and community, and relationship quality.

Recognise positive and accountable father engagement as one potential contributor to children's recovery where ongoing contact is safe, appropriate and led by the needs and wellbeing of children and victim-survivors.

Invest in family-centred approaches that strengthen protective relationships around children while maintaining clear accountability for the person who used violence.

Recovery work must not place responsibility for repairing the family solely on women and children. Where a father continues to have contact with his children, interventions must require him to understand the harm caused, stop abusive behaviour and demonstrate safe and respectful parenting. Caring Dads contributes to this objective while maintaining separate support and safety processes for mothers and children.

Kids First's experience

One of the strongest lessons from our work is that recovery cannot be placed solely on the shoulders of women and children. Too often systems invest heavily in helping families cope with the consequences of violence while investing less in addressing the behaviours that created the harm. Sustainable recovery requires both healing for victim-survivors and ongoing accountability for those who have used violence.

Children's recovery is particularly influenced by the quality of the relationships that surround them. Through our Early Help work, Kids First has observed that recovery is often expressed differently in infants and young children than in older children or adults. Improvements may be seen through attachment security, emotional regulation, developmental progress, parental confidence and family functioning. These outcomes reinforce the importance of relationship-based approaches that support both child wellbeing and caregiver capacity during the first 1001 days and beyond.

Safe and secure relationships with non-violent caregivers are critical protective factors. Where fathers continue to be involved in a child's life, recovery also depends on their willingness and capacity to acknowledge harm, change behaviour, demonstrate accountability and consistently prioritise their child's wellbeing.

Programs such as Caring Dads contribute to this objective by supporting fathers to understand the impact of their behaviour on children and to develop safer and more accountable parenting practices. However, recovery outcomes are strongest when behaviour-change interventions are embedded within broader systems that provide support for children, mothers and families alongside ongoing risk management and coordination.

The goal of recovery should not be a return to how things were before violence occurred. It should be the creation of conditions in which women, children and families can experience ongoing safety, wellbeing, connection and opportunity. Achieving this requires long-term investment in healing, child development and community participation, alongside continued accountability and behaviour change for those who have used violence.

Recovery and accountability are not separate objectives. Together, they are essential to breaking intergenerational cycles of violence. This work begins in the earliest years of life, where secure relationships, parental wellbeing and child development create the foundations for long-term resilience, safety and healing. Investment in recovery should therefore extend from infancy through adulthood, recognising that developmental wellbeing and family safety are deeply interconnected.

Access to support

What makes it easier for people to access support or services related to family, domestic or sexual violence?

Access to support should not depend on a person's ability to understand, navigate or coordinate complex service systems. Too often individuals and families are required to identify the right service, repeat their story multiple times, and navigate fragmented referral pathways while experiencing crisis, trauma or escalating risk. The Second Action Plan should focus on creating an accessible and connected system in which support is available early, entry pathways are clear, and services work together to respond to family needs.

Effective access is not simply about increasing service availability. It is about ensuring people can find help at the right time, through trusted settings, and receive coordinated support that responds to the complexity of their circumstances.

Kids First recommends that governments:

Embed family violence prevention, identification and support pathways within trusted universal services including maternal and child health, early childhood education and care, schools, primary health and community-based family services.

Create multiple pathways into support, including face-to-face, outreach, community-based and digital options, while ensuring equitable access for regional, remote and underserved communities.

Reduce barriers created by fragmented eligibility criteria, repeated assessments and referral pathways that delay support until risk has escalated.

Invest in warm referral and coordinated navigation models that actively connect people to support rather than placing responsibility on individuals to navigate complex systems alone.

Strengthen pathways that enable fathers and boys to seek support voluntarily and earlier, while maintaining robust risk assessment, information sharing and victim-survivor safety mechanisms.

Ensure services are culturally safe, trauma-informed and accessible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with disability, LGBTIQ+ communities and people living in regional and remote areas

Kids First's experience

Kids First's experience across early years, family services, youth services and family violence interventions demonstrates the importance of engaging people through places and relationships they already trust. Families are often more willing to seek support through services they know, such as maternal and child health, early childhood services, schools and family support programs, than through specialist family violence services alone.

Our experience also suggests that many fathers seek help only after significant problems have emerged. Creating accessible, non-stigmatising pathways that engage fathers earlier, particularly during major life transitions such as becoming a parent, provides an opportunity to address risks before they escalate into violence or formal system involvement.

The Caring Dads referral pathway demonstrates the value of multiple entry points. Fathers may be referred through child protection, family law, justice, family violence and community services, or may seek support voluntarily. However, successful engagement depends on much more than referral alone.

Effective access requires robust assessment processes, coordinated information sharing, partner safety mechanisms and ongoing case coordination. Access without safety is not enough.

Our work with Yedding Mura Aboriginal Corporation also demonstrates that accessibility must extend beyond physical availability. When programs are delivered through culturally governed models that embed local leadership, relational accountability and community authority, engagement and legitimacy are strengthened. Accessible systems must therefore be culturally safe as well as geographically and financially accessible.

Access is ultimately a measure of how well the broader system functions. People should be able to find support early, through trusted services, without navigating fragmented systems or waiting until problems become acute. A connected National Plan should ensure that prevention, intervention, accountability and recovery pathways are visible, coordinated and accessible across the life course. The goal should be a system that reaches people earlier, responds more effectively and reduces the likelihood that families require more intensive intervention later.

Three Key Messages

1. Put children at the centre of the National Plan as rights-holders, victim-survivors and the primary measure of success

Children and young people should be recognised as victim-survivors in their own right across prevention, response, recovery and accountability systems. Consistent with Australia's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, policies and services should prioritise children's safety, wellbeing, participation, development and recovery, and measure success through child outcomes as well as adult outcomes. Children should not be invisible beneficiaries of the system; they should be recognised as the reason the system exists.

2. Build a prevention system that starts in the first 1001 days and continues across the life course continuum

Violence prevention should be delivered through a life-course continuum that begins in the first 1,001 days, supports children and families through key developmental transitions, engages boys and young men early, and recognises fatherhood as a significant opportunity for prevention and behaviour change.

The first 1001 days provide a critical opportunity to strengthen attachment, parental confidence, child development and family wellbeing, while adolescence, young adulthood and the transition to fatherhood create important opportunities to influence attitudes, behaviours and relationship patterns. Australia should invest in a connected prevention continuum that supports children, boys, young men and fathers across the life course, rather than relying on isolated interventions at points of crisis.

3. Invest in prevention and accountability infrastructure, not just programs

Lasting reductions in violence require investment not only in effective services, but in the infrastructure that enables prevention, early intervention, accountability and recovery to occur. This includes integrated Early Help systems, workforce capability, service integration, fidelity monitoring, cultural governance, evaluation and child-centred outcome measurement. Caring Dads and Kids First's Early Help model demonstrate that sustainable outcomes are generated through connected systems of accountability, safety, relational practice and coordinated support, not through standalone programs alone.

Conclusion

The next phase of reform should focus on building a connected life-course continuum that starts in the first 1001 days, strengthens families through integrated Early Help, engages boys and fathers earlier, supports accountability when violence occurs, and promotes recovery and healing over time.

Through our experience across prevention, early intervention and behaviour change, Kids First has seen the benefits of approaches that connect child safety, father engagement, victim-survivor support and coordinated service responses. Caring Dads provides one example of how these elements can be brought together, but the broader lesson is that lasting change occurs when systems, not just programs, are designed around the safety, wellbeing and rights of children and families.

If Australia is to achieve the ambitions of the National Plan, the next phase of reform should focus on building a connected system that starts in the first 1001 days, strengthens families through integrated Early Help, engages boys and fathers across the life course, responds effectively when harm occurs, supports long-term recovery and creates the conditions to break intergenerational cycles of violence.

Together, Early Help and Caring Dads illustrate the value of a prevention and intervention continuum. Early Help strengthens the developmental and relational conditions that protect children and families before risk escalates, while Caring Dads provides a structured accountability response when violence has occurred. Both demonstrate the importance of integrated systems that support children, families and communities across the life course.

Australia has an opportunity to become an international leader in child-centred violence prevention by connecting the first 1,001 days, integrated Early Help, father engagement, accountability and recovery within a single life-course framework. The Second Action Plan should build a system that starts earlier, responds more effectively, supports healing over time and measures success through the safety, wellbeing and development of children. In doing so, Australia can create the conditions to not only respond to violence when it occurs, but to break intergenerational cycles of harm before they become entrenched.

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<https://www.dss.gov.au/national-plan-end-violence-against-women-and-children/progress/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-action-plan-progress/activities-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-action-plan/caring-dads-program-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-fathers>

Kids First Australia (June 2026), Caring Dads pack: program reach, clinical leadership, implementation experience and evidence summary.