

Social Impact Report 2024

Relationships Australia[®]
VICTORIA



Acknowledgements



We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners of the lands and waterways of Australia. We support Aboriginal peoples' right to self-determination and culturally safe services. We are committed to encouraging a culturally safe and supportive environment for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who access our services or engage with our organisation.

We recognise the lifelong impacts of childhood trauma. We recognise those who had children taken away from them.



We are committed to inclusivity and providing safe, inclusive and accessible services for all people. We welcome members of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual and other sexually or gender diverse (LGBTIQA+) communities to our organisation.



We acknowledge the funding we receive from the Australian and Victorian governments.

We acknowledge our practitioners for their ongoing commitment to improving outcomes for individuals, families and communities. We thank clients for sharing their experiences with us.

We use some stock photos in this report and advise that they are for illustrative purposes only. No association between the person/s pictured and the subject matter of the report is intended. First Nations peoples should be aware that this report may contain images of people who have since passed away.

Acronyms and initialisms

DSS	Australian Government Department of Social Services
FDR	family dispute resolution
MBCP	men's behaviour change program
RAV	Relationships Australia Victoria
TIK	Tuning in to Kids®

The *Social Impact Report 2024* is based on data collected throughout 2023–24 from a range of sources.

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Glossary of terms

Client voice	Encompasses any expression of the views, needs, experiences or outcomes shared by individuals with direct, first-hand experience, contributing to informed decision-making and service design.	Place-based approach	A collaborative, community-led strategy focused on addressing local issues within a defined area. This approach engages stakeholders in shared decision-making and prioritises community leadership to build inclusive and resilient communities.
Cost-benefit analysis	A comprehensive and evidence-based method for systematically organising and presenting the economic, social and environmental impacts of different programs.	Primary prevention	The proactive process of eliminating or reducing risk factors and enhancing protective factors to prevent a problem, disorder or harmful condition from developing.
Developmental evaluation	An evaluation approach that applies evaluative thinking and evidence to the development and implementation of innovations in complex environments.	Social impact	The overall effect of an organisation's actions, activities and/or policies on the wellbeing of individuals and communities, encompassing positive changes that address social injustices and challenges.
Early intervention	The process of providing timely support and specialist intervention as soon as a risk factor or issue is identified, with the aim of mitigating its impact, preventing it from worsening and minimising its effect on overall wellbeing.	Social and emotional learning	The process through which individuals develop skills to manage emotions and develop healthy relationships. These enable them to form healthy identities, establish positive relationships, demonstrate empathy, set and achieve meaningful goals, and make responsible decisions in personal and collective contexts.
Forgotten Australians/ pre-1990 care leavers	In Victoria, refers to people who spent time as children in institutions, orphanages and other forms of out-of-home 'care' prior to 1990, many of whom had physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse perpetrated against them.	Strengths-based approach	A holistic framework that focuses on the inherent strengths of individuals, families, groups and organisations, leveraging these strengths to foster recovery, empowerment and positive outcomes. This approach shifts away from deficit-based models by valuing people's dignity, capacities and unique abilities.
Lived experience	Knowledge of the world acquired through direct, first-hand experience, rather than through interpretations or representations created by others.	Trauma-informed	An approach that emphasises understanding and addressing the unique challenges and needs of trauma survivors. It involves anticipating potential issues, responding with sensitivity and prioritising the reduction of re-traumatisation.
Person/client-centred approach	A method of providing care and support that prioritises the individual needs, preferences and values of clients and their families. This approach treats clients as equal partners in planning and decision-making, ensuring that support is tailored to their unique circumstances and aspirations.		

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Introduction

Welcome to our Social Impact Report for 2024.

The need to promote healthy relationships and positive mental health and wellbeing has never been greater. Last year, we published Relationships Australia Victoria's (RAV) inaugural Social Impact Report and 'How we create change' animation to illustrate how we deliver positive outcomes and improved wellbeing for individuals, families and communities. We achieve this by building the skills, knowledge and attitudes that form the foundation of healthy relationships across a wide range of services (read our *Social Impact Report 2023* at socialimpact.rav.org.au).

Our new *Strategic Plan 2024–26* includes an increased focus on evidence, impact and innovation. Several key projects in 2023–24 advanced our strategic goals and renewed our focus on delivering prevention services that lead to system-wide change that reduces the incidence of relationship problems.

We recently completed a cost–benefit analysis of our family dispute resolution (FDR) services. This provided a comprehensive evidence-based analysis that demonstrates the economic and social value of FDR services for families and government. We are excited to share the initial results of this analysis on page 9 of this report.

We know that parent and family relationships are the most important protective and preventive factor in the healthy development of children and young people, particularly in the early years. This is why, this year, we partnered with the Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute on a project to review current evidence and undertake a co-design process that will inform our future prevention and early intervention initiatives.

The prevention of violence against women and children continues to be a national challenge. Australian attitudes to and understandings of violence against women and gender inequality are improving significantly; however, concerning attitudes persist (Our Watch, 2024;



Coumarelos et al., 2023). Changing behaviours requires changes in awareness, understanding and attitudes. This is why in 2023–24 we have continued to develop the evidence for our Respect and Connect program (formerly 'I like, like you'). This is our preventive healthy relationships and mental wellbeing program that has been delivered to over 12,000 students in the last decade.

In July, we shared an evaluation of our collaborative approach to strengthening family relationships in the City of Yarra. The evaluation summarises the outcomes of our long-term partnership with the Yarra Communities that Care® initiative and will inform our future place-based prevention and early intervention strategies (see rav.org.au/news/yarra-ctc-evaluation).

Building on last year's inaugural report, this year's Social Impact Report offers a more detailed analysis of selected program areas with stories that highlight the impact, depth and breadth of our work. As a result of ongoing efforts to embed routine outcome measurements into our practice, we are particularly pleased to further report on clients' self-assessed improvements across key outcome domains for a wide range of services.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Bickerdike'.

Dr Andrew Bickerdike
Chief Executive Officer

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Opoku'.

Sandra Opoku
Senior Manager Evaluation and Social Impact

Client voice and lived experience participation

All our activities are designed to centre and value the experiences, insights, perspectives and contributions of those impacted by our work.

This year, we developed a Client Voice and Lived Experience Participation Framework to establish a shared language and outline organisational activities where client voice and lived experience participation can be systematically strengthened to inform decision-making at various levels (see Figure 1).

Evaluation and research are important mechanisms for embedding client voice and lived experience participation into organisational governance. Examples are provided in this report and contribute directly to improved program design, implementation and evaluation (see one example on page 18).



Figure 1: Embedding the client voice and lived experience participation within our organisation

How we create change

The socio-ecological model of mental health and wellbeing illustrates the connection between individuals' mental health and wellbeing, interpersonal relationships and the communities they interact with.

Our theory of change explains how we create change across these levels, with a focus on strengthening healthy relationships and improving mental health and wellbeing across all our services (watch our 'How we create change' animation at socialimpact.rav.org.au).

Through collaboration with people and groups, we help build the skills, knowledge and attitudes that form the foundation of healthy relationships. This collective effort leads to positive outcomes for individuals, families and communities across 5 key domains (see Figure 2).



We create change in these 5 domains

Prevention

Preventing problems before they start by targeting the whole population or at-risk groups.

Early intervention

Addressing issues early to prevent them from getting worse and to lessen negative effects.

Response and recovery

Providing assistance and resources to affected individuals or communities to promote healing and wellbeing.

Figure 2: Our theory of change

Outcome domains

For many of our services, we routinely collect and record client outcomes at the start, at regular intervals throughout and at the end of service delivery. This is done across 4 of our 5 key outcome domains: mental health and wellbeing; family functioning; child wellbeing; and personal and family safety.

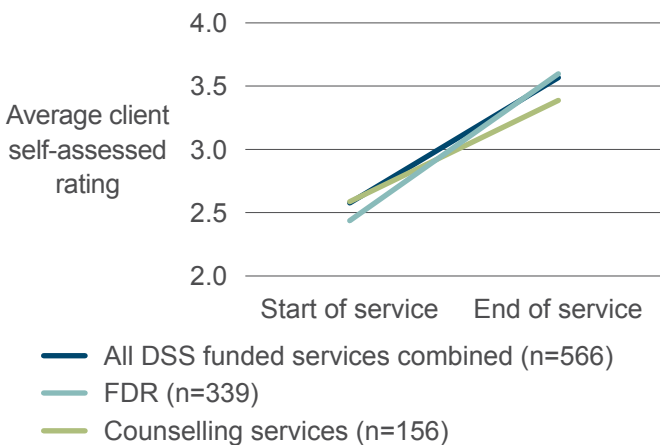
Clients are asked to rate their circumstances in each domain over the past week on a scale of 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent). The average change in each domain is calculated from paired client-assessed data from the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) Data Exchange. This reflects the difference between the average earliest and latest rating for each domain. Clients' self-assessments of change indicate improvements in subjective wellbeing across all these domains.



Mental health and wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing encompasses an individual's overall social and emotional wellbeing, including the ability to enjoy life, cope with normal stresses, set and achieve goals, and build and maintain relationships. We support families during particularly challenging times, including relationship breakdown and coping with the impact of trauma, as these situations can negatively affect mental health and wellbeing. Conversely, healthy relationships are a known protective factor for mental and emotional wellbeing. Our services directly contribute to promoting positive mental health and strengthening personal relationships (see Figure 3).

Services that contribute to mental health and wellbeing include our many counselling and case management services.



1 (very poor) 2 (poor) 3 (average) 4 (good) 5 (excellent)

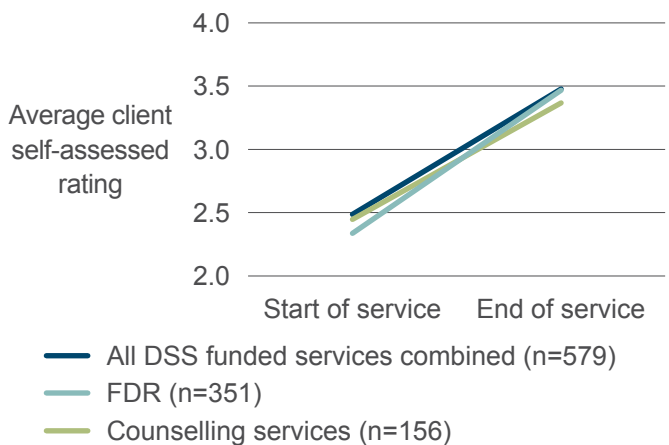
Figure 3: Mental health and wellbeing – Client-assessed change



Family functioning

Family functioning relates to the overall cohesion within a family and the ability of family members to interact, communicate, make decisions, solve problems and maintain relationships with each other. Families typically include people who live in the same household, but can also include co-parenting relationships.

Our programs improve family relationships by building the skills, knowledge and attitudes to support family members to effectively communicate, make healthy decisions and resolve conflict (see Figure 4). FDR is one of our services that contributes to family functioning (see page 9).



1 (very poor) 2 (poor) 3 (average) 4 (good) 5 (excellent)

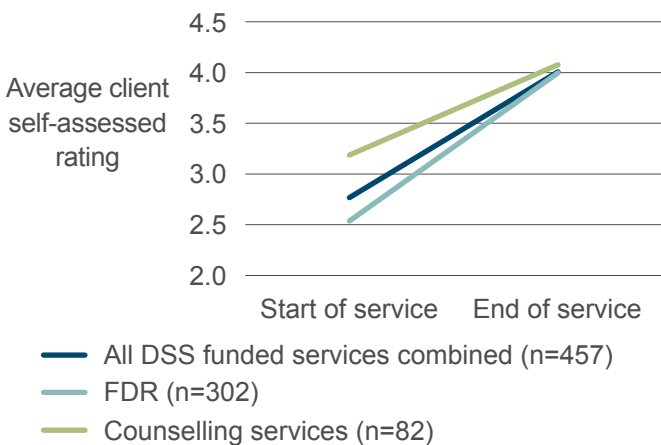
Figure 4: Family functioning – Client-assessed change



Child wellbeing

Child wellbeing encompasses overall social and emotional wellbeing, and is understood in the context of family relationships, school and community environments. Parent and family relationships are the most important protective and preventive factors in safeguarding the healthy development of children and young people (Moore, 2021). Good mental health and wellbeing is crucial for enabling children to thrive from early childhood into adolescence and young adulthood.

Across our services, clients' self-assessments show the greatest average improvements in child wellbeing (see Figure 5). The Afghan parents' groups that we deliver is an example of a program that contributes to these improvements in child wellbeing (see page 16).



1 (very poor) 2 (poor) 3 (average) 4 (good) 5 (excellent)

Figure 5: Child wellbeing
– Client-assessed change

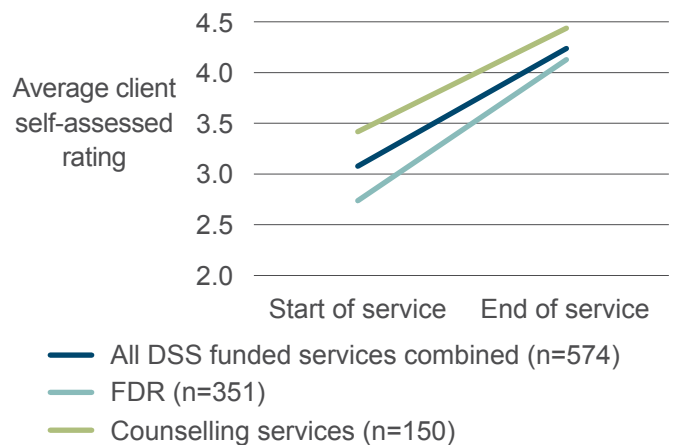


Personal and family safety

Personal and family safety encompasses feeling safe, secure and protected at home and in relationships.

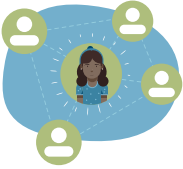
Family violence is a significant national health and wellbeing issue. Many of our programs contribute to enhanced personal and family safety, either directly through safety planning and holding perpetrators to account, or indirectly through strengthening relationship skills, improving social and emotional competencies, and promoting gender equality (see Figure 6).

Our men's behaviour change program (MBCP) is one of the services we deliver that contributes to personal and family safety (see page 13).



1 (very poor) 2 (poor) 3 (average) 4 (good) 5 (excellent)

Figure 6: Personal and family safety
– Client-assessed change



Connection and belonging

Connection and belonging are crucial for mental health and wellbeing and overall quality of life. Relationships, communities and culture can all provide essential sources of connection and belonging, offering purpose and meaning.

Finding, building and sustaining these connections or places where one feels a sense of belonging can be challenging, particularly for those experiencing trauma

or difficult times. Strengthening connection and belonging assists with parenting and managing distress, helps to reduce loneliness, supports learning and empathy and enhances feelings of safety, resilience and overall mental health and wellbeing (see Figure 7).

An example of a service that contributes to improvements in connection and belonging is the Open Place support service for Forgotten Australians (see page 11).



Figure 7: Open Place participant quotes

Impact stories

The following 4 stories highlight a selection of programs within our wide suite of services. They illustrate the immediate outcomes for individuals and families, the benefits and cost-effectiveness of our services, and the long-term preventive impact on the community as a whole.

1 Family dispute resolution: Analysing the benefits for families

FDR is a professional mediation service designed to support separating couples in resolving disputes related to parenting arrangements, property and finances. The service emphasises constructive communication and aims to reach mutually agreed solutions without resorting to court intervention.

As a leading provider of FDR, we are committed to ensuring that our service is safe, client-centred, confidential and focused on achieving outcomes that prioritise children’s wellbeing, and respect the needs of all parties involved. Our services are a cost-effective, timely and professional alternative to litigation, and

clients report high satisfaction with both the process and results. Additionally, our FDR services help reduce acrimony and improve outcomes for individuals, families and children, regardless of whether agreements are reached (Heard et al., 2024).

In 2023–24, we commissioned a cost–benefit analysis to further demonstrate and quantify the impact and value of our FDR services to families, the family law system and the community as a whole (see Figure 8). This type of analysis is a comprehensive and evidence-based method for systematically evaluating the economic, social and environmental impacts of programs.

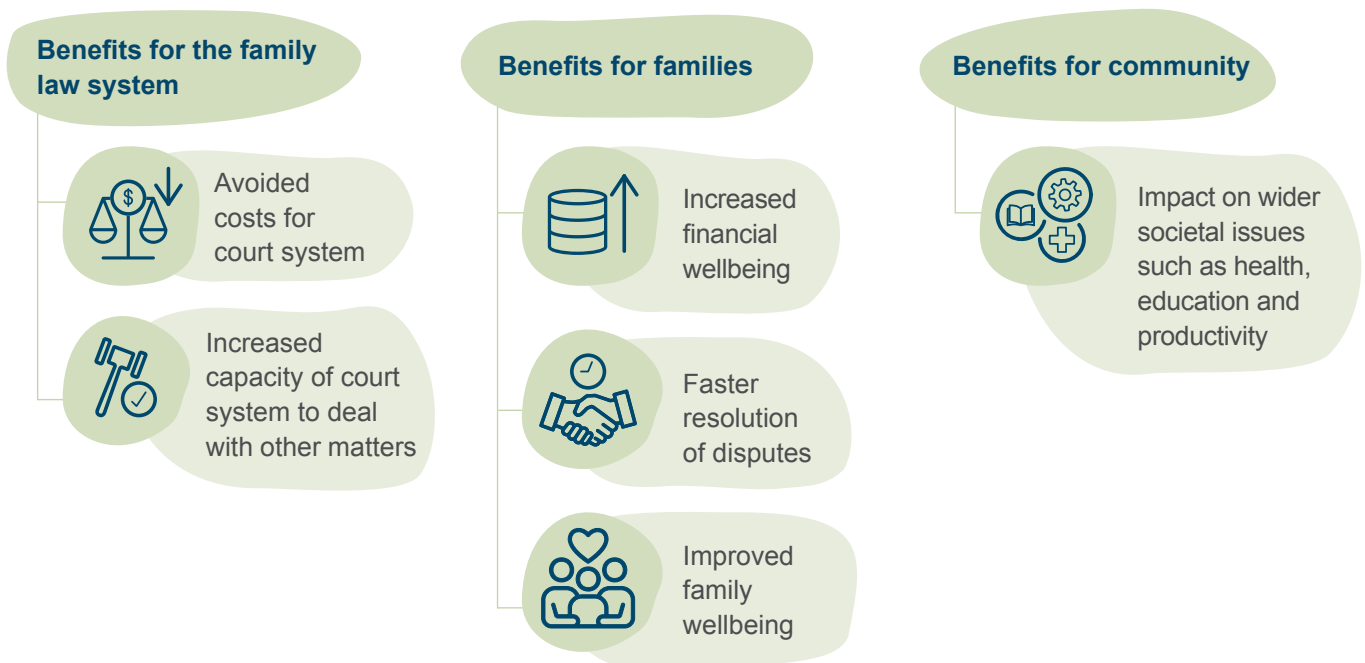


Figure 8: The impact and value of FDR services

The analysis considers the financial benefits (cost savings) and non-financial benefits (improved outcomes) of mandatory FDR for parenting matters. While previous analyses have focused on the cost savings to government in funding FDR services, we take a broader perspective, showing that the major beneficiaries of FDR are families. They greatly benefit through increased financial wellbeing and improved outcomes across 4 domains: mental health and wellbeing; family functioning; child wellbeing; and personal and family safety. Subjective wellbeing can be valued using the standard monetary value of a Wellbeing-Adjusted Life Year, as recently applied by the Centre for International Economics to value the impact of family and relationships service in Australia (CIE, 2023).

Overall, the results demonstrate a significant return on investment for government and individual families. The benefits of mandatory FDR for parenting matters are shown to be more than 20 times (20.8) the costs (see Figure 9 for a breakdown).

The cost–benefit analysis provides estimates of costs and benefits based on an average family accessing FDR services and potentially avoiding a court case. These estimates may vary across different family contexts and situations.

In addition to quantifying the benefits of parenting FDR, we will now also explore the potential benefits of incorporating mandatory property settlement into the current FDR process, which is an area of growing interest (Heard & Bickerdike, 2021).

We look forward to sharing the full cost–benefit analysis report with you soon.

20.8

Benefit–cost ratio

Benefits for the family law system	
Avoided costs to the court system	\$4,400
Benefits to families	
Increased financial wellbeing (avoided court costs per family)	\$41,800
Improved outcomes (see outcome domains page 6)	\$16,842
Total benefits	\$63,042
Costs	
Cost of FDR services to government	\$2,938
Cost of FDR services to families	\$86
Total costs	\$3,024
Net present value	\$60,018
– the difference between the total benefits and the costs.	
Benefit–cost ratio	20.8
– the value of total benefits in relation to the total costs.	

Figure 9: Results of cost–benefit analysis of mandatory FDR for parenting matters



2 Open Place: The value of belonging

Formed in response to the 2004 Senate Inquiry into Forgotten Australians, Open Place has been supporting Forgotten Australians/pre-1990 care leavers since 2010, and has been operated by RAV since 2020. Open Place offers numerous support services including: counselling; support with applying to the National Redress Scheme; help locating and accessing personal and family records; social and support groups; case management; health support; and more.

These programs are all developed and run from a holistic, person-centred and strengths-based perspective by staff who are deeply engaged, committed and experienced in this area. This reflects RAV's commitment to the foundational skills involved in working with care leavers: empowerment; respect; trauma-informed care; an understanding of the importance of attachment and identity; and an in-depth knowledge of the unique history and experiences of Forgotten Australians (Frederico et al., 2020).

Surveys

In 2024, we conducted a survey with Open Place clients, with over 300 responses received. This mixed-methods survey was designed to capture clients' satisfaction with the support and services they received, as well as their sense of connection, optimism and security. When asked to rate their satisfaction with the service they received, 81% agreed or strongly agreed they were satisfied (see Figure 10).

As a result of my experience with Open Place...

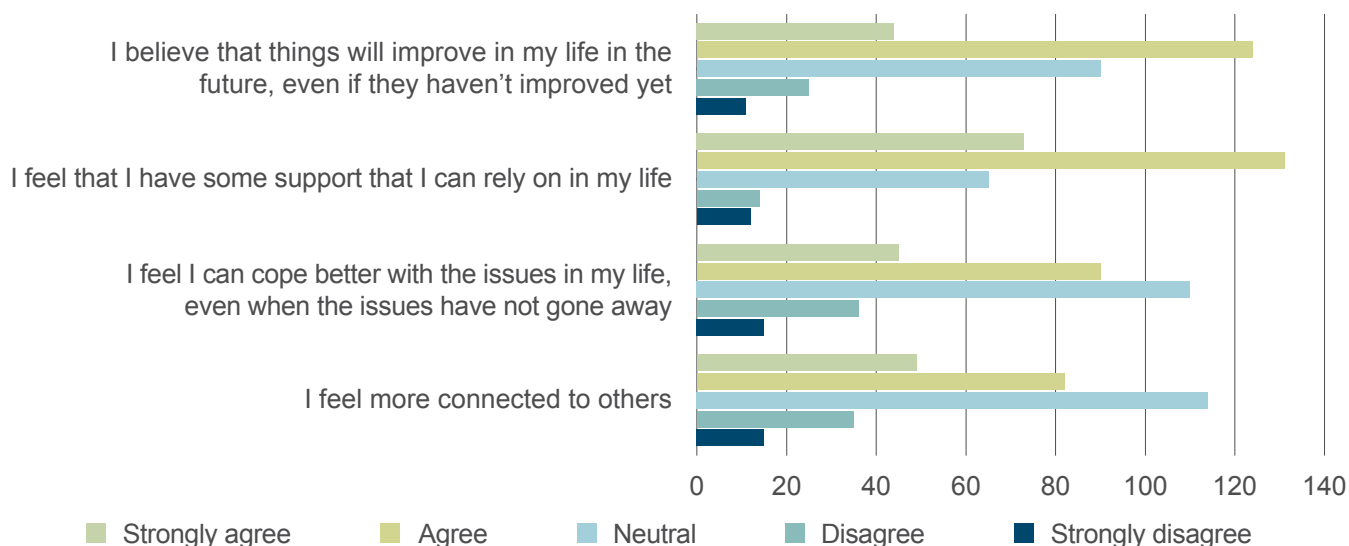


Figure 10: Open Place outcomes survey

2,130

Open Place clients (with 5,000+ registered clients)

2023–24

Clients were also asked to rate whether their experience with Open Place made them feel that things would improve in the future.

- 58% of clients reported that they felt things would improve in the future even if they had not done so yet.
- 69% of clients agreed or strongly agreed that they felt they had some support in their life that they could rely on as a result of the service.

Clients were also asked if Open Place had made a difference in their life and to describe the difference. The responses provided a wealth of insight over a range of topics and were systematically coded into themes as outlined on the following page. The themes highlight the critical role of Open Place as a reliable and safe haven for people to turn to, which is especially significant for those who have previously been profoundly let down by the very systems that were meant to support them.

This feedback underscores the transformative impact of Open Place in addressing the needs of Forgotten Australians and providing them with a sense of security, trust and belonging.

The value of being seen as a person

Open Place clients spoke about feeling deeply supported, heard and respected. This is particularly important for Forgotten Australians, who have often experienced depersonalisation as a critical form of psychological abuse (Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2004). Many Open Place service users expressed relief and gratitude for being treated with dignity and not being judged. The support provided by the service significantly reduced their anxiety, enabling them to speak openly about their issues. They appreciated the sense of belonging and the feeling of having a family to turn to. Importantly, they valued being believed and acknowledged, which helped them build trust and self-worth.

Overall, the compassionate and understanding environment at Open Place made them feel seen and valued.

The value of needs being met

The support from Open Place has been life-changing for many clients, providing critical financial assistance for medical needs such as dental, optical and pharmaceutical expenses. Clients describe the aid as a 'godsend' and a 'security blanket', allowing them to manage their health without the stress of financial strain. Many highlight the significant impact of receiving dentures, glasses and medications, noting that this support has greatly improved their quality of life. This assistance has also helped alleviate the burden of lifelong medical issues, with one client sharing that receiving hearing aids transformed their social life and outlook.

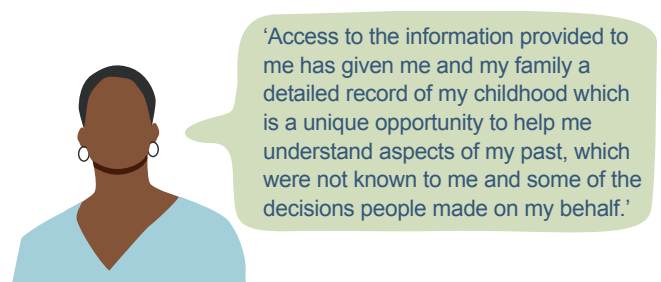
Overall, the financial support for health services from Open Place is invaluable, especially for those on low incomes, and has made a significant positive difference in their lives.



The value of identity

A common experience for care leavers is the lack of clear information about their history and life story, making the recovery of formal documentation a crucial facet in Forgotten Australians' formation of a life narrative and sense of identity (Jones & O'Neill, 2014). Evans et al. (2020) argue that supported access to documents and records is a critical aspect of meeting Forgotten Australians' 'identity, memory, accountability, and redress needs'.

This was echoed in the survey responses by Open Place clients, many of whom expressed that the detailed information provided by Open Place allowed them to understand their past and the decisions made on their behalf, leading to greater self-awareness and the ability to forgive. Others shared how obtaining birth certificates and connecting with birth or foster parents through Open Place provided a sense of control over their past. The recovery of institutional records filled gaps in their life stories and helped them process childhood memories, contributing to a better understanding of their identities.



The value of a community and connection

The responses to the Open Place survey highlight the profound impact of connection and community support. Clients feel validated, supported and understood through their interactions with other care leavers. The ability to talk openly about their experiences, gain understanding of their past and receive emotional support has been transformative. Meeting with others in similar situations provides a sense of belonging, validation and relief.

Many respondents have found hope, empathy and companionship through Open Place, improving their mental health and social lives. This support helps them move on with their lives, come to terms with their childhoods and feel connected to a caring community.

Funding statement

The Open Place suite of services is funded by the Victorian Government Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and the Australian Government Department of Social Services.

3 Men's behaviour change program: Becoming a better person

Our ongoing commitment to reducing family violence and violence against women is most clearly demonstrated in both the quantity and quality of our MBCP.

As one of the largest providers of MBCPs and family safety contact services in Victoria, we recognise the importance of innovating and improving our services to meet community needs and reflect the latest evidence. During 2023–24, we expanded our rolling-group format to reduce wait times and to diversify group dynamics. We also continued to focus on incorporating wrap-around, holistic support for our participants, ensuring they can build on their skills and commitment to change after completing the program, rather than facing this challenge alone.

Our additional services, including men's case management, individual post-MBCPs and follow-on group programs, reflect evidence that completing an MBCP is just the beginning rather than the end of the change journey. We also provide a family safety contact service to establish safety and support for partners and former partners of our MBCP participants.

Surveys

Our continuous improvement of MBCPs includes routine evaluation. Surveys are conducted at the beginning and end of the programs, asking participants to rate their understanding and skills in key outcome areas (see Figure 11). The data reflects the percentage of participants who agreed or strongly agreed with statements about their skills and understanding at both the start and end of the program. These results show

Percentage agree/strongly agree

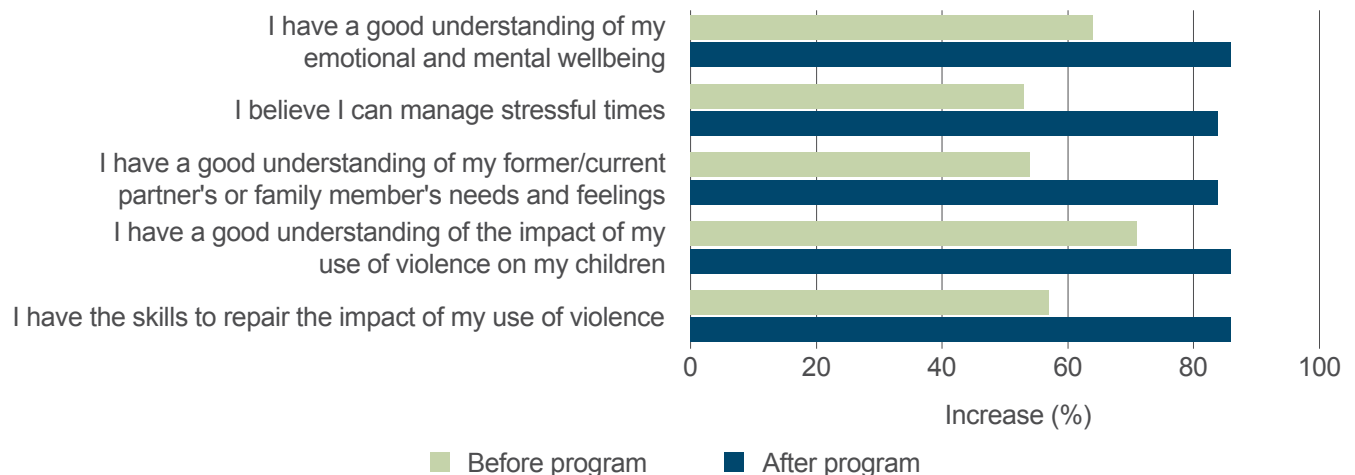


Figure 11: Average percentage increase in participants' self-assessment before and after MBCP (n=167)

829

MBCP participants

294

men's case management clients

68

post-MBCP participants

855

family safety contact clients

2023–24

consistent improvements across all measures, with participants often reporting low confidence in their skills and understanding prior to the program and much higher confidence after completion. For example, at the start of the program, 57% agreed with the statement 'I have the skills to repair the impact of my use of violence'. After completing the program, this figure rose to 86%. During 2023–24, the percentage of participants who agreed or strongly agreed in these self-assessed areas increased by significant margins, with the greatest changes being in improved skills to repair the impact of violence and an enhanced ability to manage stressful times.

Our surveys also ask participants about their experiences of the program, specifically what has been challenging and positive, and what changes it has helped them make for themselves and their families. Examining the responses to these questions illustrates themes around skills-building, accountability and responsibility, improved understanding and self-actualisation, which are further explored below.

Skills building

Positive behaviours are learnt skills, and in order to replace negative behaviours with positive ones, these need to be explicitly taught (McMurrin, 2003). In our MBCPs, participants engage in structured activities and discussions that focus on developing essential skills such as the following:

- **Emotional regulation** helps individuals manage their emotional responses, reducing the likelihood of outbursts.
- **Healthy conflict resolution techniques** enable men to handle disagreements constructively, fostering better relationships.
- **Goal setting** provides a roadmap for personal growth.
- **Positive parenting skills** ensure that fathers can model and teach respectful behaviours to their children.



Men discussed the challenging nature of consistently remembering and using new skills in areas such as emotional regulation, anger management and conflict resolution. This speaks to a self-awareness of the ongoing nature of skills acquisition and the importance of continued practice and support. They also often spoke of a sense of pride and achievement in their ability to put lessons into practice, seeing real-world reflections of the impact of these skills on their relationships and the wellbeing of their families.

Accountability and responsibility

A vital component of MBCPs is the fostering of participants' accountability by encouraging them to accept and internalise the community's expectations of non-violence, and to take responsibility for their own success or failure in meeting those expectations (Wilkes-Gillan et al., 2020). Embracing responsibility and accountability equips men with the tools and sense of power over their actions required to change their behaviour.



Accountability was often discussed in response to the question about the most challenging aspects of the MBCP experience. The fact that this was an area that challenged men indicates that it was also an area they actively engaged with and that resonated with them. They spoke about the vulnerability inherent in opening up about their actions and taking ownership of them, clearly demonstrating the importance of group dynamics, trust and respectful communication in program facilitation.

Improved understanding

MBCPs aim to significantly improve participants' understanding of mental health, emotions and the impact of violent behaviours, while fostering empathy and encouraging a willingness to seek help when needed. Although achieving a complete reversal of controlling, coercive or violent behaviours may require ongoing interventions, the program sets realistic goals for meaningful progress (Vlais et al., 2019).

'I have understood a lot of information regarding the impact of violent behaviour, root cause of violent behaviour, how to change attitudes and beliefs which can help to change the way you behave. Understanding this and changing myself helps to have a normal family and happiness and positiveness around me. I can be the source of happiness to my family.'



'Better understanding of my own mental health, triggers and ways to manage my emotions.'



Men discussed their enhanced understanding in several key areas including self-awareness, understanding others and recognising the impact of their behaviours. While these insights alone do not constitute behaviour change, they lay the groundwork for developing more self-aware, empathetic and insightful individuals. These qualities enable participants to engage in healthier relationship behaviours and to recognise when they need external support.

Self-actualisation

Tod Augusta-Scott (2006) discussed the importance of men who use violence developing a positive self-conception based on their underlying values, morals and ideals of who they aspire to be. Viewing themselves solely as violent individuals fosters a sense of shame and powerlessness, leading to behaviour that reflects this negative self-image. Conversely, maintaining positive beliefs about one's own inherent qualities and ability to change can motivate men towards becoming the kind of people they wish to be.

'I have the opportunity to teach my boys to become better men and be the role model I never had and demonstrate positive male behaviours around equality and building [healthy] relationships.'

'The best thing was personal development which makes me a better person, the flow-on effect being better experiences for the people around me.'



The men discussed learning about the qualities of positive masculinity that they identified with, and how their confidence in manifesting these qualities in their own behaviour had increased. They spoke of having hope for the future, both in their personal growth and in their relationships with family, friends and partners.

MBCP development

As part of our ongoing learning and development approach, we have identified evidence-based principles of practice for our MBCPs. In addition to a well-defined program logic, principles are useful for dynamic and complex programs as they can guide evidence-informed practice and evaluation while still allowing for flexibility and adaptability (Patton, 2017).

MBCP principles of practice:

- Promoting and supporting readiness for change.
- Focusing on accountability and responsibility.
- Understanding and addressing the connection between past abuse victimisation and current abuse perpetration, and how self-identity as both a victim and an abuser can impact each other.
- Promoting positive constructs of masculinity and actively deconstructing hegemonic masculinity.
- Working to address and combat all forms of sexism.
- Centring the safety, dignity and autonomy of victims of violence.
- Understanding, and adapting intervention and approach around, the cultural context of both victim-survivor and perpetrator.

Corresponding MBCP practice elements are used to apply these principles into practice.

4 Afghan parents' groups: Building connection and community

Tuning in to Kids® (TIK) is an evidence-based parenting group program focusing primarily on strengthening the parent-child relationship through emotion coaching. This approach involves working with parents and carers to build children's emotional intelligence and empathy, encourage collaborative problem-solving, set clear and safe boundaries, and model healthy emotional behaviour (Havighurst et al., 2009).

Some of our TIK parenting programs have been specifically adapted to meet the unique needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities. This process of adaptation goes beyond mere translation; it requires a deep understanding of the cultural, historical and community contexts of these families. These tailored adaptations are crucial for both child and parent wellbeing (Schilling et al., 2021).

As part of our ongoing learning, we held a focus group with participants from a TIK program for Afghan refugee women in Melbourne's southeast to explore the benefits of adapting our parenting programs. We also interviewed facilitators. Below is a summary of the key themes from these discussions.

Program benefits of Tuning in to Kids®

The TIK program had a profound impact on both Afghan mothers and fathers, transforming family dynamics and fostering emotional wellbeing. One woman shared that, before joining the group, she had a habit of repressing her feelings, hiding them from everyone. Through participation in the group, she learned to understand her own emotions, regulate them in a healthy way, and confidently discuss emotional matters with her partner and children. This enabled her to teach her children about emotional regulation techniques, creating a happier and more harmonious home environment.

Facilitators also noted the broader impact of the group, explaining that the lessons and connections formed within the group extended into the larger community. Participants were able to share their newfound knowledge and provide support to community members, amplifying the positive effects of their experiences.

Additionally, the introduction of the TIK program to Afghan fathers provided an alternative to authoritarian parenting styles. Fathers learned to form open communication and build better bonds with their children. This shift fostered closer familial ties, making children feel more supported and secure within their families.

125

participants

8

Afghan TIK groups

3.3

average dependants per participant

2023–24

The benefit of group participation

Participating in a group program with other parents from similar backgrounds offers significant benefits, fostering confidence, self-esteem and a strong sense of community. One participant shared how being part of the group had significantly improved her confidence and self-esteem, enabling her to stand up for herself in situations where she previously felt powerless. She credited this newfound strength to the feelings of community and validation she received as part of the group.

One facilitator noted that the proactive choice to participate was a significant accomplishment for many. The social support and community building that occurred each week were just as beneficial, if not more so, than the content of the program itself.

The shared experiences as parents from similar backgrounds facing similar challenges provided invaluable support and learning opportunities. Facilitators created a supportive group environment by setting clear rules, promoting non-judgemental attitudes and encouraging open sharing. This approach helped participants feel connected and fostered camaraderie. Some participants, initially too shy to speak, began sharing their stories through others, further strengthening the bond and forming friendships.

Additionally, facilitators introduced participants to other services, such as English classes, to further support their ongoing development and community integration. These efforts ensured that the sense of community and mutual support extended beyond the program, creating lasting positive impacts on the participants' lives.

Adapting the program for Afghan parents

Adapting the TIK program for the Afghan community involved several strategic modifications to address cultural nuances and enhance engagement. A facilitator highlighted the critical role of social capital within Afghan and refugee communities, particularly when establishing a dads' TIK group. Merely advertising the group was insufficient; it required finding a respected community member with wide influence to advocate for and encourage men to attend the program. Building social capital, understanding the community's needs and determining the most effective and accessible program format were essential steps.

Initially an interpreter, one facilitator often found herself explaining concepts beyond direct translation for Afghan women. Recognising the need for greater understanding of parenting and mental health, she trained as a TIK facilitator. Engagement improved with a facilitator from the same cultural background, removing the need for an interpreter. This allowed for

extended sessions covering crucial topics like mental health, family violence, routines and boundaries, which greatly impacted both children's and parents' emotional wellbeing.

The expanded and adapted TIK program brought significant benefits to Afghan parents, addressing specific cultural and contextual challenges. One participant shared how the group helped her become more accepting and open about mental health challenges, increasing her awareness of common mental illnesses like depression and anxiety.

Developing the adapted Afghan TIK group involved ongoing adjustments to the timing, format and content of the sessions. Facilitators identified what worked and what didn't, incorporating additional resources and content as new needs emerged. This iterative process ensured that the program remained relevant and effective for the community it served.

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Learning and development through evaluation: Respect and Connect

Since 2014, RAV has been delivering a preventive healthy relationship and mental wellbeing program to schools. The long-term goals of the program are to reduce future family violence and improve individual mental health outcomes for students.

Respect and Connect employs a strengths-based, interactive approach to help students identify and build ideas, values and skills to form healthy relationships, identify when and how to seek help, avoid and reject abusive behaviours, and effectively communicate and resolve conflict.

The program aligns with the Respectful Relationships curriculum (Victorian Government, 2024) and the Personal and Social Capability Learning Continuum (ACARA, 2013) and supports a whole-of-school approach (see relationships.vic.gov.au for more information).

The impact so far

As part of routine ongoing evaluation of Respect and Connect, we ask students to complete a survey before and after their participation in the program. The survey captures their understanding of key concepts taught as part of the program, as well as asking students to assess their own skills in areas such as emotional regulation and conflict resolution.

Generally, these areas have shown consistent increases in program-related indicators, particularly in understanding the impact of gender stereotypes on relationships, which had an average increase of 7.5% during 2023–24.

Developmental evaluation – building the evidence base

We use a developmental evaluation approach to support innovation and adaptation in complex or emergent situations (Patton, 2010). This involves integrating real-time feedback and data collection to inform ongoing decision-making and best-practice program development. The new program name Respect and Connect (formerly 'I like, like you') reflects our ongoing program development and increased focus on respectful relationships, forming healthy connections with peers, and the value of treating people from all backgrounds with respect and kindness.

The program incorporates a strong focus on social-emotional learning, particularly in the areas of self-management, social awareness and relationship skills. The current evidence on improving student mental health and wellbeing, which has become a growing area of focus for schools (Sahlberg et al., 2023), supports a whole-of-school approach centred on social and emotional learning (CASEL, 2020) from a strengths-based perspective within a safe and supportive environment (Berger et al., 2020).

The program also strongly emphasises unpacking and challenging harmful gender stereotypes and building healthy and respectful interactions and relationships. Whole-of-school approaches are vital for addressing issues related to gender equality and combating stereotypes that contribute to unhealthy relationships and gender-based violence (Flood et al., 2009). ANROWS (2021) highlights the need for tackling these issues at earlier ages to prevent unhealthy attitudes around gender and relationships becoming entrenched and intractable.

Developmental evaluation – incorporating the client voice

By centring the client voice, the program becomes more responsive, relevant and effective in addressing the specific challenges and goals of the school community. We incorporate this voice through program observations and focus groups, consulting with school staff about the concerns and needs of their student cohorts, and gathering feedback from participating students on what they liked most and what they would change.

During 2023–24, students indicated through our routine survey questions that they most enjoyed discussing difficult topics in a productive and respectful way, learning to identify unhealthy and abusive relationship behaviours, and building their communication skills.

Many students praised the activities that got them up and moving, talking and collaborating. When asked what they would change about the program, most suggested increasing the number of these kinds of engaging and fun activities while decreasing the amount of time spent in more traditional, didactic learning. This feedback aligns with research on the most effective methods of teaching social and emotional competencies, which emphasises active and exploratory teaching methods to help students build skills and internalise their learnings (Durlak, 2015).

Future goals

Adapting to emerging evidence, wider context, benchmarks and trends informs both how we evaluate and how we develop programs. Being able to clearly articulate how these aspects relate to pedagogical and relational theory and evidence supports school communities, funders and our facilitators understand the strong foundations on which the program is built.

Going forward, we plan to put the information gathered through the developmental evaluation process into action in the following ways:

- Adapting content and implementation for younger age groups to focus more directly on primary prevention.
- Incorporating more interactive components into our program while still covering important topics in an accessible and relevant way.
- Developing additional tools and information for parents, schools and students to integrate into a whole-of-school approach is crucial. This ensures that after the program delivery has finished, they can continue building on the lessons and discussions that have begun. It also supports ongoing efforts towards healthy communication, respectful relationships and connected communities.

Additional examples of how we use developmental evaluation to inform program design and delivery are detailed in this AIFS webinar: [‘How developmental evaluation can be used to develop and adapt social service programs’](#) (Opoku & Goldsworthy, 2024).



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