murdoch children's research institute

Centre for Community Child Health

Supporting children and families to thrive in their relationships

Report for Workshop Participants

FINAL
November 2024

Relationships Australia VICTORIA

The Centre for Community Child Health is a department of The Royal Children's Hospital and a research group of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute.

The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne

Supporting children and families to thrive in their relationships: Report for Workshop Participants Version: [FINAL: November 2024]

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The Centre for Community Child Health acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and pay our respect to Elders past and present.

Contents

Background 4
About this report 4
About Relationships Australia Victoria 4
About the project 4
Summary of the context and evidence review 6
What we did 6
What we found 6
The core conditions that young children and their families need to flourish 6
The current early years scene and the challenges faced by children, families, communities and services 6
The approaches that have been used to address these challenges and how effective these have been 6
How to ensure that all children and their families are provided with the core care conditions they need to flourish 7
The evidence underpinning RAV's existing prevention/early intervention initiatives 7
Summary of Workshop One 8
What we did 8
What we found 8
About systems change 9
Options from Workshop 1 11
Summary of Workshop Two 12
What we did 12
What we found 12
Possible next steps 15
Conclusion 15
Acknowledgements 16
References 17

Background

About this report

This report is for the participants of the workshops in the *Supporting children and families to thrive in their relationships* project. This project, undertaken by Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) with help from the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH), has included two workshops and two reports:

- A Context and Evidence Review (Alexander, Moore, et al., 2024)
- An Options Paper (Alexander, Prichard, et al., 2024)

This third report provides an overview of the whole project and has been written for workshop participants. Participants are also free to read the first two reports if they would like more detail.

About Relationships Australia Victoria

Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) is a state-wide, community based, non-profit organization. RAV provides family and relationship support services. Their vision is for positive, respectful, safe and fulfilling relationships for all Australians. RAV offers a range of relationship services including 'early matters', a preventative and early intervention program for parents in the early years. The term parent in this report is inclusive of all primary caregivers, including biological parents, kinship carers, adoptive parents, foster carers, and any other individuals who provide primary care and support to a child.

Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) is interested in understanding how they can best influence positive systems change to help children and families thrive in their relationships. RAV asked the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) to do a review of the evidence and develop an options paper to help work out what to do.

About the project

For children to grow and develop as best they can, their core needs must be met. These core needs include can be grouped under six headings: relational needs, safety and protection needs, health and nutrition needs, learning and activity needs, environmental and material needs, and service needs (Moore, 2021). Regarding relational needs, children require positive relationships with their parents or caregivers. They also benefit from positive relationships with other adults, families and children. The most important thing to help with positive emotional and behavioural well-being in children is having a strong, secure attachment to their parents and caregivers. Factors that may get in the way of this secure attachment forming, include parent mental health concerns, history of family relationship problems, and parental stress.

This project aimed to develop a range of evidence and stakeholder-informed options for RAV to consider. A workshop was conducted by CCCH in September 2024 in Ballarat, using the information from the review of evidence. Workshop participants included staff from RAV, parents and caregivers, and professionals from other early years' service providers. Participants discussed the evidence and created ideas for RAV. The same participants were invited to a second workshop in October 2024 to further discuss and agree on an action plan for RAV.

The key question to be addressed by this project was:

- What can RAV do to positively influence the system to support children and families to thrive in their relationships?

This project will inform an organization-wide strategy to provide prevention and early intervention initiatives for families and children, adapted to the context and needs of local communities.

Summary of the context and evidence review

What we did

This context and evidence review explored several areas including - what child and families need, what the early years scene is like (for families and services), approaches used, how the early years environment might be improved, and the evidence supporting RAV's current early years services. We drew on over 100 publications including books, journal articles, reports and reviews and brought together the evidence as follows:

What we found

The core conditions that young children and their families need to flourish

We found:

- These conditions are largely relational for both children and parents
- The quality of parent-child relationships is crucial, and depends on caregiver wellbeing
- Addressing these conditions enables a preventative approach to child health and wellbeing
- Fully addressing these conditions requires changes at a government level regarding policy settings and funding, but they can also be impacted by organisations.

The current early years scene and the challenges faced by children, families, communities and services

We found:

- there are numerous challenges children and families can face which can place strains on the development of early parent-child relationships.
- numerous programs and services have been developed to respond to the problems children and families can develop.
- these programs and services tend to be disconnected, siloed, approaches with limited evidence, insecure funding, and delivered in the context of policy complexity.

The approaches that have been used to address these challenges and how effective these have been

We found:

- approaches included parenting programs, attachment interventions, and playgroups.
- modest positive effects have been found for some families
- effectiveness is supported by:

- having a range of options available,
- the services being strengths-based and relationally delivered,
- outreach is available,
- and participants are encouraged to be involved in the design and delivery of services, and to make lasting connections with each other.

How to ensure that all children and their families are provided with the core care conditions they need to flourish

We found:

- provision of safe spaces and opportunities to connect with other families is essential,
- build parenting and child development knowledge
- providing integrated family hubs enables families access to social support and soft entry points (front door access) for services if they have additional child or family needs.

The evidence underpinning RAV's existing prevention/early intervention initiatives

We found:

- both the internal review of the early matters program and evidence from the literature offer support for the existing prevention/ early intervention offerings in the following ways:
  - support is offered early – before the birth of the first child
  - there are a range of offers variously targeting children and parents, with a conscious effort made to include fathers
  - programs are informed by evidence and program logic with the strongest evidence base available for Tuning in to Kids.
  - ongoing data is gathered from participants and used to inform program development and participants are being involved in this review
  - support is offered in collaboration with other service providers and in a range of environments including hospitals, maternal and child health centres, kindergartens, schools, and outreach to family's homes.

With what we have learnt from this review of the evidence and context, we then asked: From its position in the early years system, how could RAV respond to increase its impact and best support the relational needs of children and their families?

Summary of Workshop One

What we did

CCCH held a half-day workshop in September 2024 in Ballarat. Participants included staff from RAV, parents/carers, and professionals from other local child and family services. The workshop included a presentation of the context and evidence review and a series of small group discussions.

What we found

Workshop participants listed over 100 ideas for action or points for consideration from their discussions. These ideas and points were thematically analysed. The themes identified are listed in order of volume of response, and described as follows:

- Place-Based Services/Hubs (18) - Offering supports and services where families gather and/or other services are offered
- Important Service Qualities (17) - Offering services in a particular way
- Social Coordinator (12)- Creating a social coordinator role
- Journey of Life (8) - Providing support and services across the life course
- Home Visiting (7) - Providing support and services in the home
- Stigma (6) - Reducing or eliminating societal judgement
- Relationship Promotion (6) - Promoting the importance of healthy relationships
- The Village (5) - Supporting the creation of communities for families
- Collaboration (4) - Collaborating with other organisations
- Technology (4) - Considering the benefits and drawbacks of technology
- Advocacy (3) - Advocating for additional funding
- Core needs (2) - Meeting the core needs of families
- Sundry Ideas (9) – e.g. teaching social skills, weekend playgroups

Participants at the first workshop were asked to put a star next the ideas that they thought were most important to highlight. There were 24 points highlighted. These were grouped into the same themes as above. The themes that were most represented in these priorities were:

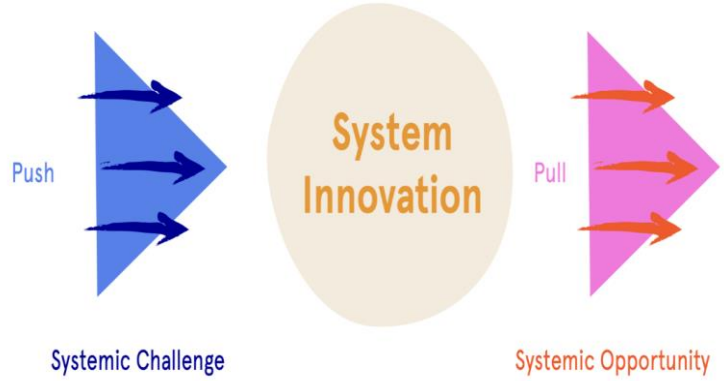
1) **Important Service Qualities** (6) – easily accessible - soft entry, no silos, free, variety/choice, for face-to-face options to be available, and “practical basic support where needed including being heard and held without judgement.”
2) **Social Coordinator** (5) – developing a role with the primary purpose of facilitating social connections between families.

3) **Place-Based Services/Hub** (4) – co-location with universal child and family services, creating a safe in which families could make long-lasting and valued connections with other families.
4) Other themes that were highlighted once included - Core Needs, Journey of Life (this was around extending RAV's work in schools to make it more ongoing and to perhaps have some peer-led work undertaken), Relationship Promotion – it was suggested that RAV could reinforce the message that relationships make the difference through a public health campaign. Home Visits, Stigma, Technology, and finally Sundry Ideas - two points regarding building the social/relational skills of parents to enable them to build community and connect, and also an idea regarding Action Research on school attendance post-COVID.

About systems change

RAV came to CCCH to assist them with how they could best influence the system to promote positive family relationships for children. It is challenging to influence how things are at a systems level, but it can be done. The end goal of systems change is to create a positive and enduring change for society and the people within in it (Bolton & Davies, 2020). Through studying successful systems changes in history, frameworks have been developed to help us with our efforts.

Leadbeater & Winhall (2020) created a Green Paper on System Innovation. They tell us that system innovation – new ways of doing things – arise when there is a push from a systemic challenge and a pull from a systemic opportunity. Our systemic challenge is how to help children and families to thrive in their relationships in our modern society. The systemic opportunity may come from, for example, the increasing demand from the community to end family and domestic violence.



Leadbeater & Winhall (2020)

Firstly, in their framework Leadbeater & Winhall talk about three levels on which change can occur and inform us that we need to work across all three of them:

1. **The Macro level** – changes in societal values, how people think and feel about things.
2. **The Meso level** – policy, regulation and infrastructure
3. **The Micro level** – products, practices, and programs – what is done or offered on the ground.

Leadbeater & Winhall also talk about **working on one or more of the four keys for unlocking systems change**, as described below.

1. **Purpose** – the purpose of a system is what the people and activities within a system are centred around. Powerful systems change arises when the purpose of a system changes.
2. **Power** – changing the purpose of a system can change and challenge who has power within that system.
3. **Resource flows** – resources in a system can include technology, knowledge, finances and reputation. Systems change involves new ways of using these resources to achieve better outcomes.
4. **Relationships** – "All systems are fundamentally relational" (Leadbeater & Winhall, 2020, p. 34) and systems change can occur when new patterns are made in the relationships between the various actors in the system.

Systems change is more likely to come about when those wanting to influence the system can "catch a wave of change to take them forward" (Leadbeater & Winhall, 2020, p. 22). Possible waves of change for RAV include:

- the review of the Family Relationships Services Program (FRSP)(Metcalfe, 2024)
- the National Early Years Strategy (Department of Social Services, 2024-2034)
- the Ballarat Community Saturation Model (Respect Victoria, 2024)

Options from Workshop 1

The themes from all of the ideas from the first workshop were placed at the three levels of change on the following chart:

Macro

Options	Themes	Priority	Levers	Keys
Public Health Campaign*	Relation Promotion The Village Stigma Core Needs	Yes	Creating demand Design for mass reach Mobilise a shared voice Attract a media spotlight	Purpose

Meso

Options	Themes	Priority	Levers	Keys
Integrated child and family hub*	Place-Based Services/Hubs Important Service Qualities The Village Collaboration Core Needs	Yes	Expand the organisation Use new vehicles Harness collective effort Shape sector practice Establish new institutions	Purpose Power Resources flow Relationships

Micro

Options	Themes	Priority	Levers	Keys
Social connector role* Expanding home visit availability* Expand work in schools Explore technology Building social/ relational skills of parents Action Research project Review services with lens of co-design*	Social Coordinator Core Needs Important Service Qualities, Home Visiting Journey of Life Technology Sundry Ideas	Yes	Expand the organisation Alter or reallocate funding Improving regulations and standards Creating feedback loops	Power

* Aligns with FRSP Review, EYS, or BCSM

Summary of Workshop Two

What we did

Participants at the second workshop paired up to discuss the ideas and select three priorities to discuss in more detail. Pairs then joined another pair and discussed again to gain agreement. These groups then fed back to the facilitators. Every group selected the public health campaign, integrated child and family hubs, and the social connector role. One group also put forward the idea of expanding home visiting services to enhance "social connection, collaborative visits, warm referrals". The group proposing the idea opted not to have it as one of the discussion groups but rather for it to be noted as something RAV may wish to consider.

What we found

The three ideas participants selected unanimously were 1) Public media campaign, 2) Child and family hub, and 3) Social connector role.

Public media campaign

The idea generated and prioritised at the first workshop to increase community understanding about the importance of relationships through information provision, a public health campaign, or some sort of advertising or media campaign, was the only idea placed at the macro level of change. This idea aligns with the identified strategies in all three opportunities for system change – the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP) review, the Early Year Strategy (EYS), and the Ballarat Community Saturation Model (BCSN).

The participants from the second workshop refined this idea to be about using media spokespeople/champions to provide psychoeducation around all relationships, not just intimate partner relationships. Information the group felt was important to share through this campaign included:

- What a healthy relationship looks like, including green flags and red flags
- The benefits of healthy relationships
- Normalising that everyone experiences challenges in their relationships and needs support sometimes
- That relationships are fundamental and as important as our basic needs.

The group also discussed why this topic is so important for all to understand – government, funders, service providers, community, people who are not engaged in services – and the importance of co-campaigning with others to reinforce the messages. The group pondered whether Action Research could play a role in both developing and measuring the effectiveness of this option.

Child & family hub

This idea came from a strong, prioritised theme identified in the data from Workshop One – Place-Based Services/Hubs. This was the only idea identified as being at meso level of change. The idea aligns with the strategies from the FRSP review and the EYS.

The participants in the second workshop who elected to discuss this idea concluded that the concept of the child and family hub was deeply connected to the two other ideas – that it needed to be built upon a broader and deeper knowledge of the importance of relationships and to have a social connector role operating within and across the hub.

The group felt that child and family hubs should be flexibly co-developed in different neighbourhoods in Ballarat, rather than creating a giant one-stop-shop in the centre of Ballarat. Identifying and building upon local opportunities to both co-locate services and build connection between families could be the starting point. Participants suggested that the hubs could be an opportunity to create links across generations and so options inclusive of services or supports for teens or elderly people could be considered. The notion of creating a place for 'the village' was discussed. The group felt it was important to have opportunities outside of normal business hours for communal meals or playgroups, and for there to be links with universal services such as libraries, playgrounds or the local shops.

Participants in this group expressed a view that RAV could play a role in influencing and expanding the concept of a hub arising from the FRSP review, beyond just the co-location of services.

Social connector role

This idea came from the prioritised Social Connector theme from the first workshop. It was one of many ideas at the micro level of change. The idea aligns with the outcomes sought from the EYS for families to be connected to each other, to help children and parents/caregivers to thrive and to build stronger, safer, inclusive communities.

The workshop participants discussed the specific qualities of the role and also the broader system needed to support the role; collaboration with other service providers would be essential. The group felt that the role would need to operate on behalf of the network and be connected to the open-door policy of a child and family hub, providing warm links to other services. The role would also involve enabling peer groups and community connection. A backbone role, it would need to be built-in and ongoing and supported by the whole service system. It was thought that a fundamental element of the role would be to connect parents to other parents in a purposeful way (rather than casually hoping this will happen). It was felt that an outreach function was also required to find the families who are not coming to a hub

or other services/supports, and that it needed to be somebody's job on behalf of the system to find and connect people, both with services and with other families. It was identified that outreach is expensive, particularly as it can require cars, and therefore RAV could consider linking with an early years service who already does outreach.

The group felt that people most in need are the least likely to connect with such a role, and that providing practical support e.g. food bank, transport, community meals, could be a good way of enabling engagement with this cohort. Additionally, it was felt that it would be ideal to ask them where they would like to meet and be connected to such a role.

Possible next steps

Through this project, RAV are attempting to address the complex issue of how to positively influence the system to support children and their families to thrive in their relationships. The approach we took brought together evidence from the literature, practice-based evidence from professionals, and the lived experience expertise of parents and caregivers. The three key ideas emerging from this project are strong and connected. Consideration of the complexity of RAV's aim now needs to flow through to the plan for action. The three options identified through the process of this project are likely to work better if they are:

- Implemented together rather than as individual 'silver bullets'
- Tested and implemented with a learning/continuous improvement approach – e.g. start in Ballarat, learn, adapt, and then slowly scale to other areas,
- Connected to other relevant work that other parts of the system are doing and done in partnership with others, and
- Continue to involve families in the design, testing and delivery of the options. This involves the key of power sharing and brings the benefits of families lived experience and continued family and community engagement, creating a strong foundation for success.

Conclusion

Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) asked Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) to help them positively influence the system, to help children and families thrive in their relationships. The project involved a review of the early years context and evidence, and two stakeholder workshops. Many ideas for action were generated through the project. Three of these ideas were chosen by workshop participants as priorities to explore in more detail. These three leading options were:

1. Conducting a public media campaign to broaden and deepen understanding in the community and about the importance of relationships and community, what healthy relationships look like, and the benefits of healthy relationships.
2. Developing child and family hubs as safe spaces for families to access integrated universal, specialist services, and practical help, as well as to connect socially with other families.
3. Creating a social connector role with the dual purpose of connecting families to each other and providing a connection between services. The social connector could play a role in locating new families and outreaching to them on behalf of the system, facilitating warm connections across services and families.

RAV plan to progress the options with a project group internally and may reach out to workshop participants to be involved again in future, if participants are interested and available.

Acknowledgements

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