Centre for Community
Child Health

Supporting children and families to thrive in their relationships

A review of context and evidence for Relationships Australia Victoria

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Supporting children and families to thrive in their relationships: A review of context and evidence for Relationships Australia Victoria
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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.

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Background

About this report

This report contains a review of the context and evidence concerning the role of relationships in the optimal development and wellbeing of children. It is the first of two outputs for the *Supporting children and families to thrive in their relationships* project, undertaken for Relationships Australia Victoria.

About Relationships Australia Victoria

As a state-wide, community based, non-profit organisation that provides family and relationship support services, Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV)'s vision is for positive, respectful, safe and fulfilling relationships for all Australians. RAV offers a range of relationship services across the prevention, early intervention and response spectrum, including 'early matters', a preventative and early intervention program for parents and caregivers 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 with their prevention and early intervention services, and have therefore commissioned the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) to undertake an evidence review and develop an options paper to inform their future direction.

About the project

There is a wealth of evidence pointing to the range of needs that children have in order to grow and develop optimally. In a recent review of the literature, Moore (2021) groups these needs under six headings: relational needs, safety and protection needs, health and nutrition needs, learning and activity needs, environmental and material needs, and service needs. Specific to relational needs, children require positive early caregiving relationships as well as exposure to a range of other adults, families and children. Moore notes that "the single most important factor in promoting positive psychosocial, emotional, and behavioural well-being is having a strong, secure attachment to their primary caregivers" (2021, p. 25) and that there are a number of factors that may get in the way of this secure attachment forming, including parent mental health concerns, history of poor attachment with their caregivers, and stressful family circumstances.

This project aims to develop a range of evidence and stakeholder-informed options for Relationships Australia Victoria to consider in order to grow their preventative early

childhood/parenting offers. An iterative co-design process has been adopted to i) reach agreement on the challenges to be addressed (i.e. undertaking an evidence review and then making sense of this), then ii) consider the options for RAV, producing recommendations tailored to RAV's specific needs and circumstances (i.e. development of an options paper). A workshop will be conducted by CCCH, using the information from this review to facilitate discussion amongst representatives from RAV, current or previous service users of early matters*, and* professionals from other early years' service providers. The aim of the workshop will be to reach agreement on the challenges to be addressed, and then consider the options for RAV. CCCH will then produce recommendations tailored to RAV's specific needs and circumstances (i.e. an options paper), and a second workshop will be held to further discuss and agree on an action plan for RAV.

The key questions to be addressed are:

- As a specialist provider of family and relationship services where can RAV best focus their attention and leverage the early years landscape to influence positive systems change?

- What are RAV's options to best influence social/systems change through prevention and early intervention strategies?

- What is the evidence underpinning RAV's existing prevention/early intervention-oriented initiatives (including early matters) and how might the organisation build on these in their ambition to positively influence the system towards prevention/early intervention?

This evidence review will inform an organizational-wide strategy to prototype/design and then scale up/scale out a model for RAV centres to provide prevention and early intervention initiatives for families and children adapted to the context and need of local communities.

Method

A pragmatic review[1] was undertaken involving the identification, review and synthesis of relevant published and grey literature pertinent to the following five areas:
1. The core conditions that young children and their families need in order to flourish
2. The current early years scene and the challenges faced by children, families, communities and services
3. The approaches that have been used to address these challenges and how effective these have been
4. How to redesign the early years environment to ensure that all children and their families are provided with the core care conditions they need to flourish

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[1] A pragmatic review adapts the conventional systematic review process to take into consideration limited time and/or resources available

5.   The evidence underpinning RAV's existing prevention/early intervention initiatives including early matters.

The review drew on 106 publications including 24 meta-analyses/systematic reviews. Publications included books, journal articles, reports from relevant think tanks, government reports, RAV's internal reviews, and other recent reviews undertaken by CCCH. Publications were identified through key word searches of databases including PubMed, PsychINFO, and Google Scholar, searches of websites of key projects or interventions, and snowballing from references in relevant studies. While neither systematic nor exhaustive, the pragmatic approach taken to the review enabled an efficient, timely, and problem-focussed response to RAV.

This review is presented to RAV as a draft for discussion.

Findings

Current context of the early years

1. The early years and the core conditions that young children and their families need in order to flourish

What do children need to flourish?

If we are to do better by young children and families, the evidence indicates that there are two key issues we need to keep in mind: the importance of the early years and the importance of the conditions under which families are raising young children. The early years are important because, when considering the entire life course, it is early experiences, pre- and postnatally, that have the greatest influence on the physical, mental, and cognitive development of the child (Moore, 2024). Ensuring that children get the best start in life therefore should be a priority. The conditions under which families are raising young children are important because these have a greater impact on child and family outcomes than do the services they receive (Moore, 2024). Ensuring that children and families are provided with the conditions they need to thrive should also be a priority.

What then are the conditions that children and families need? Moore (2024) has summarised the evidence regarding what children and their parents need to thrive, that is, the conditions most enabling of positive outcomes both in childhood and later adulthood. Beyond the basic physical needs for adequate nutrition, sleep, and health care, children's primary needs are relational (Moore, 2024). The optimal context for a child to develop is within secure and responsive relationships with their parents and caregivers (Moore, 2024; World Health Organisation, 2004). Secure parent-child attachment is associated with positive outcomes in development, wellbeing, and participation and has lifelong effects (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). The quality of a child's primary attachment relationships is central to the development of their relationships with others (Bowlby, 1982a, 1982b, 1982c). It is within the context of these primary early relationships that children develop their ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour (Cassidy, 2016; Fearon et al., 2010; Pallini et al., 2018), build their social skills (Groh et al., 2014), and develop expectations about how others are likely to behave towards them and feel about them (Bowlby, 1982a, 1982b, 1982c). Attachment quality is associated with the development of communication skills (Belsky & Fearon, 2002), resilience (Tharner et al., 2012), and long-term outcomes in physical (Esposito et al., 2013; Maras et al., 2016; Puig et al., 2013; Rapoza et al., 2016) and mental health (Sroufe, 2005; Verhees et al., 2021).

Insecure and disorganised attachment are associated with internalised and externalised child behaviour problems (Fearon et al., 2010; Fearon & Belsky, 2011; Madigan et al., 2013). Child behaviour problems and parental stress mutually escalate each other over time (Hastings, 2002; Neece et al., 2012; Schuiringa et al., 2015). Parental stress and child

behaviour are also both bi-directionally associated with child maltreatment (Hastings, 2002; Hastings, 2003; Maclean et al., 2017; Younas & Gutman, 2023). Early intervention and prevention to support children and families to thrive in their relationships offers an opportunity to circumvent this escalating cycle of negative parent-child interactions (Howe, 2006; Perry, 2004).

The other core needs of children include their relational need to interact with peers; their physical need to play and explore; their emotional needs for safety and protection from relational stress; and their developmental need for experiencing positive learning environments at home, in the community, and in education and care settings (Moore, 2024).

What then do parents need to be able to meet these core needs of children?

Children are most likely to develop a secure attachment to their caregivers when those caregivers are able to provide sensitive and responsive caregiving (Fearon & Belsky, 2016), and parental stress is detrimental to parental sensitivity (Sturge-Apple et al., 2017; Tharner et al., 2012). What then is helpful for parents to flourish, to have manageable levels of stress, and the optimal opportunities to meet their child's needs? Moore (2024) informs us that the core needs of parents and caregivers are also relational. Humans are social creatures and positive connection with others is a core need at any age (Allen et al., 2014). As such, caregivers benefit from the informal support of friends, family, neighbours, and other parents, and from formal supports available from service providers with a relational and family-centred approach, both before and after the birth of their child (Moore, 2024). Parents need time to establish their relationship with their baby; safe, accessible spaces to meet with other families; and access to specialist services for additional needs such as mental health concerns or family violence (Moore, 2024). Parents need opportunities to learn both about parenting and child development, and to build their own capabilities (Moore, 2024). Feeling socially included in the community and having access to family-friendly employment opportunities are also optimal conditions for parents and caregivers (Moore, 2024).

Finally, the core conditions required by both children and their parents include: safe, secure, affordable housing; financial security; a safe and healthy physical environment; access to healthy food options; accessible and inclusive community facilities; and access to support services for additional family needs (Moore, 2024). The current services, policy settings, and funding provisions in Australia do not adequately address these core needs of children and families (Moore, 2024).

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

What is it like for a young family living and growing in Victoria in 2024? What challenges do they, their child, and their partner/co-parent face, particularly in terms of their relationships?

Focusing directly on relationships, we find that as many as 41% of Australian one-year olds and 29% of four-year-olds have insecure or disorganised parent-child relationships (McIntosh et al., 2024). Each year around 2.3 of every 1000 married Australian couples divorce (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024b), and around half of these divorces involve couples with children under the age of 18 years (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2023). In 2021, 10% of Australian families were comprised of single parents with dependent children (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2021). Finally, social isolation and loneliness, which is detrimental to physical and mental health, has been found to affect 15% of Australians (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022).

Parents and caregivers can face challenges which make the formation of positive and responsive relationships difficult. Such challenges include pre-existing or post-natal mental health conditions, family violence, a traumatic childhood of their own, or current stressors regarding money, housing, or relationships (Moore, 2024). Developmental delays or disabilities can create further parental stress and impede a child's ability to communicate their needs and connect emotionally (Biringen et al., 2005; Guralnick, 2005). Recent data shows that 10.5% of Victorian children aged from birth to 12 years have emotional, behavioural or developmental problems, 4.8% have a parent with high levels of psychological distress, 7.8% live in households experiencing financial insecurity (i.e. they could not raise $2000 in two days in an emergency), and 7.4% are in families that have no one to turn to in a crisis who could look after them (Victorian State Government, 2023). In addition, 21.5% of children under twelve have had special health care needs for at least 12 months (Victorian State Government, 2023).

At the extreme end of the causes and consequences of unhealthy family relationships, we find child maltreatment and family and domestic violence. Recent nationwide data shows that 26% of Australian women and 18% of Australian men had experienced child abuse and/or witnessed parental violence before the age of 15 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023), while another Australian study (n=8,503), suggested this figure may be as high as 62% of Australians (Mathews, 2023). The effects of experiencing abuse and/or exposure to domestic violence include significantly greater risks of mental and physical health problems, and health risk behaviours such as substance abuse, obesity, smoking, self-harm and suicide attempts (Mathews, 2023; Moore et al., 2015). An Australian study synthesised the evidence available to quantify the burden caused by child maltreatment in Australia on mental health alone and concluded that a significant proportion of self-harm, anxiety and depressive orders were attributable to the experience of child abuse (Moore et al., 2015).

What is going on in the broader community in which they live?

These challenges faced by individual children, parents, and families pose further challenges at the community level (Moore, 2024). People who experience social isolation and loneliness can in turn become less accepting of people they perceive as being different (Hertz, 2020). Risk taking behaviours such as substance abuse, arising from the effects of childhood trauma (Mathews, 2023), can increase rates of crime in the community, reducing the sense of safety for everyone. The economic costs to society of childhood abuse include the costs of providing services for elevated rates of physical and mental health problems, and the reduced productivity from poorer educational and vocational outcomes (Moore et al., 2015). Each year around one in five Victorians experience a mental health condition and around 45% of the Victorian population will experience a mental health condition at some point in their life (State Government of Victoria, 2023). In Victoria in 2022, 92,296 incidents of family and domestic violence were reported to police (Crime Statistics Agency, 2022) and 4% of Victorians over the age of 15 years were estimated to be victims of personal crime (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024a).

What services are there to help them and their family, and what challenges are the services facing?

The challenges faced by the service system trying to address these individual child, parent, and societal problems include limited and unreliable funding available, and the targeted nature of such funds, creating silos of service provision. Funding comes from different government departments and philanthropic funds, with a targeted focus on single problems and/or clientele (Moore, 2021). There are funds dedicated to mental health, physical health, housing, education, crime, disability, community cohesion, and family functioning. Within each of these silos, there are further silos created through targeting clientele, for example, services for infants, children, adolescents, adults, the elderly, people who live in different geographical areas or are from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

What does this all amount to?

The landscape for a child and young family living and growing in Victoria in 2024 is one therefore where they may face:

- Personal challenges within their family which strain their relationships with each other and reduce the likelihood of secure parent-child relationships forming,
- Community challenges which decrease their sense of safety, belonging, and support, and
- A service system which is complex, siloed, and difficult to navigate.

Collectively, the multitude of these family challenges is experienced at the community level as challenges with social cohesion, crime, and the costs of attempting to improve the mental and physical health of the public.

And what about the policy context?

The policy context in which in which all these challenges are occurring is a very crowded space. Numerous reviews of various early years policies and strategies have been recently completed or are currently underway. These reviews include but are not limited to:

- Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System (Department of Education, December 2023)
- Independent Review of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (Parliament of Australia, May, 2023)
- National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Joint Council on Closing the Gap, 2020)
- National Early Years Strategy (Department of Social Services, 2024-2034)
- Productivity Commission Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector (Department of Education, 2023-2024)
- Review of Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention (2024-2025)
- Review of Inclusion Support Program (Department of Education, 2023)
- Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (Department of Social Services, 2021-2031)
- The Australian Childcare Inquiry (2023) into the early childhood education and care market, assessing the affordability and accessibility of childcare for families across the nation (The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2023)
- The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia: Belonging, Being, and Becoming (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022)
- The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (National Mental Health Commission, 2021)

The number of these reviews and their disconnected nature is evidence both that there is a need to improve the context and circumstances for Australian families but it also evidence of the complexity of the early years service sector and the overlapping reforms being undertaken. The recommendation from the Independent Review of the NDIS to establish a new tier of 'foundational supports' has only added to the current state of flux.

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

What programs have been delivered?

The default approach to addressing the challenges that some children and families experience have been treatment-oriented and service-driven rather than prevention-oriented and context-driven (Moore, 2024). When children develop mental health or behavioural or learning problems, we develop programs to address these problems, for example, mental health and behavioural programs (Moore, 2021). Beyond clinical services, parenting

programs and playgroups are two typical approaches that have been applied to these kinds of challenges.

A wide variety of **parenting programs** have been created, provided and researched. Various services or programs have moderate effects for some of the people who receive them but no programs are effective for all in our diverse society – not just culturally and socio-economically, but in beliefs, values, and needs (Moore, 2024). There have been multiple reviews of parenting programs in recent years (Axford et al., 2018; Barlow & Coren, 2017; Gadsden et al., 2016; Jeong et al., 2018; Peacock-Chambers et al., 2017) and from these reviews we have learnt the following:

- Parent-child interactions can be improved by the provision of programs designed to promote caregiver responsiveness in the first three years of life (Axford et al., 2018; Barlow & Coren, 2017; Jeong et al., 2018; Peacock-Chambers et al., 2017)
- Effective strategies to promote caregiver sensitivity and responsiveness include home visiting, infant-parent psychotherapy, and video feedback on parent-child interactions (Axford et al., 2018)
- The effects of these interventions can include improved cognitive and motor development, communication skills, and parent-child attachments (Jeong et al., 2018)
- Early support is more beneficial than later (Moran et al., 2004)
- As no one program has been found to be effective for everyone and as programs are more effective when informed by the preferences of prospective participants, a variety of options should be available (Moore, 2021)
- Overall, evidence available for the effectiveness of parenting programs is limited in quantity and quality, and at best shows moderate effectiveness (Moore, 2021).

Recent reviews of the limited research evidence available on parenting programs which aim specifically to improve parent-child attachment, have found positive effects such as increased parental sensitivity and improved attachment quality (Facompré et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2020; Kohlhoff et al., 2022). According to Kohlhoff et al. (2022), the attachment intervention programs with the strongest evidence base are Attachment and Biobehavioural Catch-up (ABC) (Dozier & Bernard, 2017) and Child-Parent Psychotherapy (Lieberman, 2004). A review of attachment interventions used with children with a disability or developmental delay has found the evidence to be even more limited (Alexander et al., 2023). However emerging results are positive and common elements of effective approaches included coaching and video-feedback (Alexander et al., 2023).

Playgroups are another service response to some of the problems faced by families. There are a wide variety of playgroups available – some supported/ facilitated, some targeted to specific cultural or ability groups, and some run by volunteers and open to all in the local community. Positive effects found from participation in playgroups have included a reduction in social isolation for parents (McLean et al., 2022); improved social and emotional outcomes for children (Commerford & Robinson, 2016); improved developmental and

educational outcomes for children (McLean et al., 2022); and playgroups can act as a soft entry point to other child and family services (Commerford & Robinson, 2016).

What other approaches have been tried?

Families with the greatest level of need have been found to under-utilise services so a considered approach is required by service providers regarding ease of access and engagement (Eapen, 2017). Provision of outreach services has been found to be valued by families, as has hands-on support to connect with other services (Boag-Munroe & Evangelou, 2012; Cortis et al., 2009; Jose et al., 2020; Wyndow et al., 2020). Research into the effectiveness of various human services has found that the way in which services are delivered, significantly impacts outcomes (Moore, 2021). The quality of family-professional relationships is central and can be fostered through a respectful, strengths-based approach, focussed on the priorities and preferences of the family, and supporting them to build their confidence, capabilities and sense of empowerment (Moore, 2021). The quality of service implementation affects outcomes (Melhuish et al., 2018). High quality services blend an empathic, relational approach with technical expertise (Moore, 2021). Other factors of service delivery found to influence outcomes for families included: offering a variety of programs to choose from, co-operative and integrated multi-agency working, and employing highly qualified and well-trained staff (Moore, 2021).

Investigations into the features of effective programs for First Nations children and families found that indigenous community controlled organisations had better outcomes (Hutchins et al., 2007). Services were more effective when they were a) integrated, addressing both physical and emotional wellbeing, b) there were good relationships between First Nations and non-indigenous people, c) employees were First Nations people with relevant qualifications and training, d) assistance with transport was provided if necessary, e) history was acknowledged along with traditional ways of knowing and being, and f) services were inclusive of extended family members (Hutchins et al., 2007).

Some of the shortcomings of the research available for the very long-term impacts of early child and family programs include that the studies available tended to have small numbers of participants. Additionally, the growth of knowledge regarding child development and family work has evolved such that programs run today would not attempt to emulate programs from decades ago (Moore, 2021).

Overall, the evidence suggests that programs developed to address the challenges faced by children and families are somewhat beneficial for a percentage of families but not to all, tend not to be readily accessible for the families who need them the most, are difficult to scale up, and do not address the root causes of the challenges that families face (Moore, 2024). This is where attending to the core conditions that children need to flourish offers an alternate, preventative approach.

How to address the current context

4. How to redesign the early years environment to ensure that all children and their families are provided with the core care conditions they need to flourish

To optimally design circumstances into which all children can be raised to flourish, we would begin with **policy settings which ensure safe and suitable housing, family friendly employment, access to healthy foods, and a safe, inclusive neighbourhood** (Moore, 2024). Modelling from an Australian population representative sample from a longitudinal study has indicated that an income supplement (of $AU26K) to low income households in the first year of life could reduce parental mental health problems by an estimated 7% and improve developmental outcomes for children – social-emotional adjustment by 12%, child physical functioning by 10%, and child learning outcomes by 11% (Goldfeld et al., 2024).

With the toxic stress of poverty removed, focus could then turn to reforming the current siloed services available for families, into an easily accessible, and cohesive service system (Moore, 2021). One way of doing this, is to **establish integrated child and family hubs** (Moore, 2021).

Integrated child and family hubs have been a key feature of the early years environment for Nordic families since the early 2000s, having been pioneered in Sweden back in the 1970s (Kekkonen et al., 2012; Simpson, 2018). While there are variations in the integrated child and family hubs across the various Nordic countries, they are underpinned by shared ideals and concepts (Kekkonen et al., 2012). Simpson (2018) described the four main pillars of the family centres in Sweden and Norway as being midwifery, maternal & child health, early childhood education and care, and social work. The hubs provide safe spaces for families to meet, and are intended for use by all families beginning with antenatal care and extending into school and adolescence (Kekkonen et al., 2012). In some Nordic countries the hubs have what is referred to as an open kindergarten or a family café, where parents can drop in whenever they choose during open hours, with their child/ren, to have a play and interact with other families (Kaiser et al., 2022). The hubs are designed not only to offer universal and specialist services, but also to build lasting relationships between families (Kaiser et al., 2022; Kekkonen et al., 2012), building social networks, and helping to normalise the experience of parenting and address problems at a low threshold (Simpson, 2018). All families are allocated to facilitated parent groups for the first year of their oldest child's life and then encouraged and supported to continue meeting without a facilitator ongoingly (Kekkonen et al., 2012). The hubs are run cooperatively between various government and non-government service providers in partnership with community members (Kekkonen et al., 2012). The aim of the hubs is to improve child development outcomes through improving the wellbeing, skills, knowledge, and social connection of families, early identification of problems, and easy access to specialist services if required (Kekkonen et al., 2012; Simpson, 2018).

There appears to have been limited research on the outcomes of these integrated child and family hubs in the Nordic countries. However, having experienced funding cutbacks in response to a financial recession, there have been moves to enshrine the hubs in legislation to reduce volatility from changing policy and fiscal circumstances, indicating the value in which these services are held (Kekkonen et al., 2012). Positive regard by families is reflected in qualitative data such as this:

> "Perhaps this is precisely the magic of family centres, the family cafes, and other open meeting places? That we support very ordinary families with very ordinary problems in a way that is down-to-earth and mundane? And that all this is so mundane that it even evades strictly scientific investigation, so that we just have to trust the mundane words of ordinary people – they make me feel better, they help me get through the day, and now I have some new friends?" (Kekkonen et al., 2012, p. 54)

Integrated child and family hubs have also been established in Europe, the USA, UK and Australia but are not universally available in any of these countries (Moore, 2021). In Australia there are now over 100 child and family hubs (Honisett S., 2023). The limited research available on the outcomes of these hubs is promising and indicate the benefits, the important features, and what the challenges can be in establishing them (Moore, 2021). Some of the identified benefits of the hubs included improved outcomes in child health, school readiness and academic outcomes, parental confidence and knowledge, family engagement with services, and earlier identification of families needing additional supports (Honisett S., 2023). Independent research of the Sure Start integrated child and family hubs which were set up in low income areas in the UK from 2006 to 2010, showed strong evidence for improved academic performance, in particular for children from non-white and/or low income families (Carneiro et al., 2024). Benefits were also found in reduced hospitalisations, and there is ongoing research into effects on social care and youth crime (Carneiro et al., 2024).

Some key features of effective hubs identified, included the importance of including high quality early childhood education and care programs, playgroups, parents using the space to meet and connect with other families, and a range of parenting programs (Moore, 2021). Hubs can hold a range of services in one location but can also act as a front door to other services (Honisett S., 2023). Outreach services augment the availability of support for families who may otherwise face barriers to access (Moore, 2021). Professionals employed in hubs need to have high quality training and access to reflective professional supervision (Moore, 2021). As services need to be relationally-based, the management of staff turnover is an important consideration (Moore, 2021). Services need to be evidence-based, informed by lived experience, and easily accessible to, and inclusive of all (Honisett S., 2023; Moore, 2021). While there has been a tendency to target low socio-economic communities to establish integrated child and family hubs, many children from economically disadvantaged families

do not live in low socio-economic communities (Goldfeld et al., 2024) and so would miss out with this approach.

RAV's current response to the context

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

RAV has been running the early matters service in the City of Brimbank and the City of Ballarat since 2015. early matters is a prevention and early intervention strategy aimed at improving child wellbeing and development, parental confidence and skills; strengthen positive family relationships; promote social and emotional competencies; improve gender equity; and reduce violence against women. The early matters program works in partnership with other programs and services, offering elements of the program in hospitals, maternal and child health settings, kindergartens and schools in Ballarat and Sunshine. early matters has been funded until June 2026. The various elements of the program are all optional and families may partake of as many or few of these component programs as they wish. The program has evolved over time in response to participant feedback. The currently available elements of early matters include the following parenting programs:

- family support service
- educational antenatal and maternal child health sessions
- evidence-based parenting programs including Tuning in to Kids, Tuning in to Teens (TINT), and Circle of Security- Parenting (COS-P)

The following student programs were previously part of the 'early matters' program and were included in the 2019 internal review of early matters. early matters may continue to deliver these programs in the future, and school-based prevention programs are still a key part of RAV's broader prevention strategy.

- Ready Set Kids
- Respect and Connect

RAV conducts ongoing internal assessment of the early matters program components. This review process includes participant surveys, with a mix of open-ended qualitative data and the use of validated pre-and post-measures such as the Parenting Empowerment and Efficacy Measure (PEEM) and previously included the Me as a Parent Scale, and the Single Sessions Consultation Framework. Teachers in participating kindergartens and schools also complete feedback surveys. An interim impact report was completed in 2019 which indicated a positive trend in outcomes. The RAV internal evaluation of the evidence-based programs included in early matters, focussed largely on their program logic as the effectiveness of the programs has been evaluated elsewhere. Since the 2019 internal review, RAV has updated their evaluation design for early matters to include Standard Client/Community Outcomes Reporting (SCORE) (Australian Government) and have recently introduced the PEEM (Freiberg

et al., 2014). Findings from the 2019 internal review and the present review of the literature are outlined as follows in Table 1 for each of the programs.

early matters elements from 2019 evaluation	Description	RAV internal evaluation evidence from 2019	Current evidence that supports the model	Current model adaptations in response to evidence and client need
Home Visiting Outreach	1-6 home-visits focused parent-prioritised challenge.	self-reported 30% reduction in parental stress regarding the targeted problem, a 27% reduction in the impact of the targeted problem on families, and a 9% increase in parental confidence.	research evidence for Single Session Therapy (SST) is limited but promising (Kim et al., 2023; Mulligan et al., 2022).	Family Support Sessions are not time limited and can be delivered by phone, videoconferencing, or in-person.
ATTUNE	one-off one-hour educational antenatal sessions delivered to parents in hospitals	509 pre- and post-surveys from participants, 46% of whom were expectant fathers. Results indicated increases of ~ 6-7% in parent-reported confidence	ante-natal support has been found to have positive effects on infant health, opportunity for parenting group experience, meet other expectant parents, and have access to professional advice (Kekkonen et al., 2012)	In addition to ATTUNE we now also deliver ATTUNE + delivered at first time parent groups at Maternal Child Health Centres.

Circle of Security-Parenting program (COS-P)	manualised parenting program usually offered to small groups of parents in 8 sessions		evidence available for the program's effectiveness is limited (Risholm Mothander et al., 2018).	This program was added post 2019.
Tuning in to Kids	group-based parenting program for parents of children aged up to twelve years		program has been examined in multiple randomised-control studies with numerous significant positive effects found (Fateme Aghaie et al., 2017; Havighurst, Duncombe, et al., 2015; Havighurst et al., 2013; Havighurst et al., 2009; Havighurst et al., 2010; Mastromanno et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2012, 2014; Wilson et al., 2016).	
Tuning in to Teens (TINT)	adaption of the Tuning in to Kids program aimed at parents of teenagers.		several randomised-control trials have been conducted all with significant positive findings	

			(Havighurst, Kehoe, et al., 2015; Kehoe et al., 2014; Kehoe et al., 2020; Rolock et al., 2021).	
Ready Set Kids	4-week program delivered to children in kindergartens	90 pre and 77 post-program surveys of teachers - 18% increase in students emotion-management skills, 11% increase in students understanding and identifying their emotions, and 96% of teachers confident students able to develop healthier relationships following program.		Currently not being delivered but may continue to be a part of the early matters in the future.
ILLY Up (now Respect and Connect)	4-week program delivered in schools	The ILLY-Up program achieved promising program status with the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 2018. 504 pre- and 369 post-	Content for the program was developed on the basis of evidence regarding bullying (Biswas et al., 2022), interpersonal behaviours (Burke et al.,	Respect and Connect is delivered across Victoria as part of RAV's broader prevention strategy. Ongoing evaluation demonstrates improvements in key indicators. The program has

		program surveys have been completed. Improvement in student scores post program found on confidence and awareness of own and others emotions, relationships and equality. Teachers gave an average score of 8.6/10 for program satisfaction and 8.5/10 for program meeting school needs.	2004), gender stereotypes (Blum et al., 2019), violence prevention (Flood, 2021), empathy (Fu et al., 2022), and improving relationship skills, self-regulation, and awareness (Browning, 2020; Hawkins et al., 2005).	adapted in recent years in response to emerging evidence and evaluation.

Table 1: Summary of evidence for early matters (2016-2019)

Family Support Sessions (previously Home Visiting Outreach)

The home visiting outreach component of early matters was adapted from the single session therapy framework (Hoyt et al., 2018). Single Session Therapy (SST) aims to maximise the benefit a person receives from their first session of therapy as it is acknowledged that this may be the only session the person ever attends, but SST also allows opportunity for further sessions (Hoyt et al., 2018). SST takes a strengths-based approach, drawing on the participant's existing knowledge, strengths, and skills, offering timely assistance (Mulligan et al., 2022). Research evidence is limited but promising (Kim et al., 2023; Mulligan et al., 2022).

The family support sessions of the early matters program is a structured and time limited service and client-focused approach to addressing a realistic goal the family are finding challenging and elect to focus on. Common topics include attachment, behaviour, parenting and relationships. The internal evaluation of the outreach program used the Me as a Parent Scale, and the Single Sessions Consultation Framework and found a self-reported 30% reduction in parental stress regarding the targeted problem, a 27% reduction in the impact of the targeted problem on families, and a 9% increase in parental confidence.

ATTUNE and ATTUNE+

ATTUNE is a one-off, one-hour antenatal education session for first time parents which covers topics such as relationships, emotions, parenting, attachment, self-care and help-seeking. The sessions are delivered in local hospitals and aim to engage expectant fathers as well as mothers. The aim of the program is to help expectant parents consider how having the baby may influence their relationship, give parents ideas about promoting attachment with their baby, how to notice and address their own emotional health care needs, and where to seek help if needed. Since 2019, early matters now also delivers ATTUNE+ which is a similar program offered post-natally through Maternal & Child Health settings.

The 2019 internal review only included ATTUNE participants (not ATTUNE+) and consisted of 509 pre- and post-surveys from participants, 46% of whom were expectant fathers. Results indicated increases of ~ 6-7% in parent-reported confidence in identifying what could put a relationship under stress, confidence with self-care and in seeking support, and confidence in forming a relationship with their baby.

Ante-natal support has been found to have positive effects on infant health and offers an opportunity for first time parents to experience participating in a parenting group, meet other expectant parents, and have access to professional advice (Kekkonen et al., 2012). Ante-natal support can also provide an opportunity to involve fathers as well as mothers in parental support and advice from this very early stage (Kekkonen et al., 2012).

Circle of Security-Parenting program (COS-P)

The Circle of Security-Parenting program (COS-P) is a manualised parenting program usually offered to small groups of parents in 6-8 sessions. COS-P is a simplified version of the evidence-based 20-week Circle of Security Intervention (Powell et al., 2014). The aim of COS-P is to improve the capacity of parents and caregivers to sensitively respond to their child's needs and serve as a secure base from which their child can explore (Powell et al., 2014). COS-P is widely delivered in various continents across the world primarily as a preventative psycho-educational tool for parents of young children (Gerdts-Andresen, 2021; Powell et al., 2014). Evidence available for the program's effectiveness is limited (Risholm Mothander et al., 2018) and the evidence of effectiveness with families facing multiple challenges is even more constrained (Gerdts-Andresen, 2021). A recent Australian randomised-control study (n=85) found a small decline in negative parenting and attachment anxiety compared to people on the wait-list (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2022).

Tuning in to Kids

Tuning in to Kids is a group-based parenting program for parents of children aged up to twelve years. Developed in Australia, and implemented internationally, the program aims to

help children manage their emotions and behaviours through teaching emotion-coaching skills to their parents. The effectiveness of the program has been examined in multiple randomised-control studies (Fateme Aghaie et al., 2017; Havighurst, Duncombe, et al., 2015; Havighurst et al., 2013; Havighurst et al., 2009; Havighurst et al., 2010; Mastromanno et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2012, 2014; Wilson et al., 2016). Significant effects found from the program include increases in the emotion-coaching skills of parents, increased parental empathy, reductions in parental negative-dismissiveness and angry reactivity towards their children, increased parental knowledge about child emotions, improved child behaviour, and improved child understanding of emotion (Fateme Aghaie et al., 2017; Havighurst, Duncombe, et al., 2015; Havighurst et al., 2013; Havighurst et al., 2009; Havighurst et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2012, 2014; Wilson et al., 2016).

Tuning in to Teens (TINT)

Tuning in to Teens (TINT) is an adaption of the Tuning in to Kids program aimed at parents of teenagers. As the program is newer than Tuning in to Kids, there is less research available but several randomised-control trials have been conducted (Havighurst, Kehoe, et al., 2015; Kehoe et al., 2014; Kehoe et al., 2020; Rolock et al., 2021). Significant findings across these studies include improvements in parental impulse control and emotional socialisation; decrease in family conflict; and improved youth emotion awareness, regulation and socialisation, which was also related to reductions in youth behaviours of concern (both externalising and internalising) (Havighurst, Kehoe, et al., 2015; Kehoe et al., 2014; Kehoe et al., 2020; Rolock et al., 2021). TINT has also been researched for effectiveness with highly anxious youths, and also for adoptive parents, both with significantly positive results (Kehoe et al., 2020; Rolock et al., 2021).

Ready Set Kids

Ready Set Kids, (previously known as Confident Kinder Kids), is a multifaceted program delivered to children in kindergarten and early primary school. Though not currently running, the program may continue to be a part of the early matters prevention strategy in to the future. The program runs over 4 weeks and aims to help the students adapt to kindergarten or school and peer relationships. Ready Set Kids focuses on building children's emotional and social literacy, and their knowledge of healthy/unhealthy relationships. The content was developed by RAV, as an age-appropriate adaption to the Respect and Connect program outlined below and informed by the content of Tuning in to Kids. The program also aims to enhance the educator's capacity to support the emotional and relational development of their students.

RAV's 2019 internal review of Ready Set Kids involved analysis of 90 pre and 77 post-program surveys of teachers. The review found an 18% increase in teachers noticing students using skills to manage emotions, 11% increase in teachers noticing students being able to

understand and identify their emotions, and 96% of teachers felt confident that students would be able to develop healthier relationships following the program.

Respect and Connect

Developed and delivered by RAV across Victoria since 2014 (to over 12,000 students) the 4-session Respect and Connect program was previously delivered as part of early matters under the name 'I like, like you up' or ILLY-UP. Respect and Connect still runs as part of RAV's overall prevention strategy and aims to provide a supported environment for students to undertake interactive, skills-based activities that help to:

- build social and emotional learning which is a foundation for preventing family violence and enhancing mental wellbeing
- increase awareness of healthy relationships
- promote gender equality
- improve communication skills and self-awareness.

Both the Respect and Connect and Ready Set Kids sessions are delivered by qualified facilitators who hold Working with Children Checks and are experienced in working with young people and responding to their wellbeing needs. The program content aligns with the Victorian Government Department of Education and Training's Respectful Relationships Curriculum; and the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's (ACARA) Personal and Social Capability, and Mental Health and Wellbeing, curriculum.

Respect and Connect program topics include:

- Healthy relationships
  - How to identify red, orange and green flags
  - Healthy, unhealthy and abusive relationships
  - Your own needs and values
- Gender equality
  - What are gender stereotypes?
  - How can gender stereotypes impact relationships?
- Emotional intelligence
  - What are emotional intelligence skills?
  - How can we learn to manage our emotions?
- Effective communication
  - How to handle conflict
  - Challenging online hate and creating a positive online world
  - When a relationship ends

The 2019 RAV internal review of early matters included 289 pre- and 174 post-program surveys from teachers whose students participated in ILLY-UP (as the program was known then). ILLY-Up achieved promising program status with the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 2018, indicating the documented theory and research, program logic, best-practice activities, facilitator qualifications and program evaluation met minimum standards. Since then, the school-based prevention program has undergone significant development in response to emerging evidence and ongoing evaluation.

This program was reviewed again in 2020, and 2022-23 and a focus group was held in 2023. Teachers gave an average score of 8.6/10 for program satisfaction and 8.5/10 for program meeting school needs. The most recent review showed a significant improvement in student scores post program on knowing how to achieve respect and equality in relationships; knowing when a relationship becomes abusive; confidence in communicating feelings and managing relationship conflicts; awareness and understanding of own and other's emotions; and awareness of how gender stereotypes can impact a relationship. Additionally, 90% of students reported once they had completed the program, that they knew where to go for help if they needed it.

Conclusion

This context and evidence review has explored a number of areas.

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

We have 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 have 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 have 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 have 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 have found:

- both the internal review of early matters 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 can now ask: 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?

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