

Relationships Australia®

VICTORIA

2023 / 2024

— YEARS —

Never standing still; stepping up to the challenge

What was Victoria like 75 years ago, how has it changed and what will it be like in the future? These are questions we contemplated at Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) as we prepared to mark our organisation's 75th anniversary in the 2023/24 year. Our remarkable journey, intertwined with the rich tapestry of Victoria's history calls for reflection, celebration and consideration of the future.

Throughout our history, RAV has never stood still. We've been shaped by the ever-changing needs of our clients and the community, as well as evidence and research that informs best practice. The organisation has actively stepped forward time and again to meet new challenges head on, resolute in our commitment to change, improve, adapt and evolve.

In marking our 75th anniversary, we are looking ahead, and envisioning a future in which we continue to be synonymous with service excellence, and having a meaningful impact on people's lives. We are committed to expanding our service breadth to meet the evolving needs of our community while still delivering programs in response to ongoing needs. With valued and long-standing relationships with the legal sector, we stand ready to collaboratively and co-operatively respond to family law reforms.

The lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic have clearly demonstrated the benefits of online service delivery, particularly for those in rural and remote areas, and we are eager to develop additional programs in this area to enhance accessibility.

We seek to enhance and extend our family violence and mental health programs, and to develop further prevention and early intervention services. We believe that while the long-term outcomes of this type of work are harder to demonstrate, this is where we can have the largest impact and change lives, now and for future generations.

Our longevity is not the result of a single decision. Rather, it's because of the passion and dedication of our staff, leadership and Board members, as well as those who came before us, whose contributions have underpinned the foundations of our success.

Our staff, deeply committed and highly skilled, focus first and foremost on the safety, experiences and needs of our clients. With each passing year, these needs become more complex and our clients need us more. This only fuels our relentless pursuit to improve and make a difference to the lives of our clients and their families, and the wider community.

Our success is also due to support received from our funding bodies, stakeholders and service partners. We are grateful for all the support we receive, which enables us to do what we do best – focus on assisting our clients. Our presence after 75 years is a testament to our positive standing in the community, and the enduring trust our clients have placed in us.

Together, as we embark on the next chapter of our journey, we will work towards our vision for all Australians to have positive, respectful, safe and fulfilling relationships. Just as we have done throughout our history, we will do our work even when it's not easy, because we know how important relationships are to health and wellbeing. In fact, nothing matters more.



Dr Andrew Bickerdike
Chief Executive Officer
Relationships Australia Victoria



Professor Lyn Littlefield OAM
Board President
Relationships Australia Victoria



Family violence: out of the shadows

Page 5



Surviving 262 days of lockdown

Page 6



From warfront to home front: post-war marriage guidance support

Imagine this: You've been away at war, facing unimaginable hardships and trauma, separated from your family and all that you know and love for months, even years. Finally, you return home, eager to embrace the familiar comforts and safety of family life, only to find that home has changed, and so have you.

In the aftermath of World War II, countless service men and women, nurses and Australian Defence Force personnel had to grapple with the daunting task of reintegrating into a post-war world in which so much had changed. Back then, they used the term 'shellshock' to describe the impact on many service men and women that we now recognise as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Families, once tightly knit, had been torn apart by extended separations and routines disrupted by the tumultuous war years. Traditional gender roles had begun to undergo a profound shift and women, who had taken on vital roles in the workforce during wartime, were now experiencing newfound employment opportunities and greater independence. In this evolving landscape, divorce – once a rare and frowned upon option – was gaining appeal for couples struggling with the seemingly impossible task of rebuilding their marriage and family.

There was growing concern about the erosion of traditional values and the family unit, and a recognition that couples had nowhere to turn for professional support to try to rebuild their lives together.

Many in the community called for the establishment of marriage guidance councils around Australia comprised of volunteers providing guidance on matrimonial problems. The aim? To stem the growing marriage 'crisis'.

So, in 1948, Melbourne's first Marriage Guidance Council was created, which was to later become Relationships Australia Victoria – RAV.



An Australian army serviceman, and member of the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force, during World War II

Pioneering change in counselling and beyond

RAV has always held a simple yet profound purpose: to help people. This commitment has driven the organisation to step forward and lead, even when it has not been easy to do so, and when it has encountered resistance. It has chosen to develop and deliver services for those experiencing trauma, family violence, separation and divorce, mental health issues, gambling problems, institutional child sexual abuse and forced adoption – all topics that were once shrouded in silence with limited available support.

Throughout its history, RAV has sought opportunities to understand, respect, acknowledge and advocate for the needs and best interests of the community. The organisation values its clients' experiences, feedback and insights, which guide their decision-making, and it has amplified the voices and experiences of those who were often ignored or overlooked, to the government, sector and community.

RAV's expanding service range is indicative of the organisation's ability to adapt and innovate in line with the changing needs of increasingly broad groups of clients. What began as one or two services focusing on couples' counselling and marriage guidance, has evolved into a diverse suite of services for workplaces, professionals, communities, schools, families, parents, couples and individuals, including children and young people.

RAV is proud to work with Forgotten Australians, people with disability, First Nations peoples, individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, members of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual and other sexually or gender diverse (LGBTIQ+) communities, people who have experienced trauma, and those from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Across its journey, the organisation has incorporated varying models within its services, and this is particularly evident when considering the changes within its counselling services. It is not uncommon for therapeutic approaches ranging from psychotherapy to family therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy and telehealth to be used, as needed and appropriate, so as to provide a tailored service for clients.

The organisation has a firmly-established reputation for delivering high-quality services using person-centred, best-practice and evidence-informed models of care. This approach integrates research and evidence with practice knowledge and client perspectives, to inform program design, implementation and evaluation. These approaches support the regular monitoring, evaluating and improvement of programs, and enable service impacts to be demonstrated.

In addition to routine outcome measurement, RAV has a long history of choosing to undertake additional targeted research in areas that affect their clients. Such activities help to strengthen the evidence base of services and inform policy, service improvements and changes in the sector.

Throughout the years, and during profound social, financial and technological changes, one unchanging thread has remained constant within RAV – the organisation has always been there to provide high-quality services, to all Victorians when they needed it most.

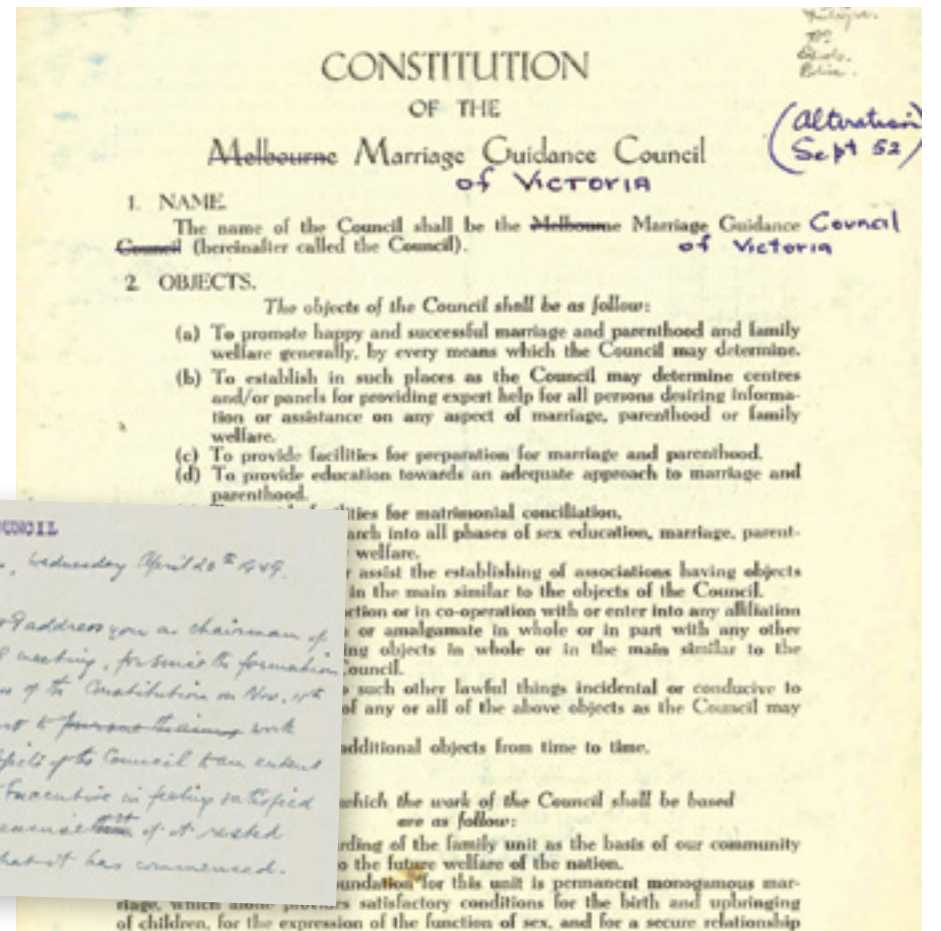
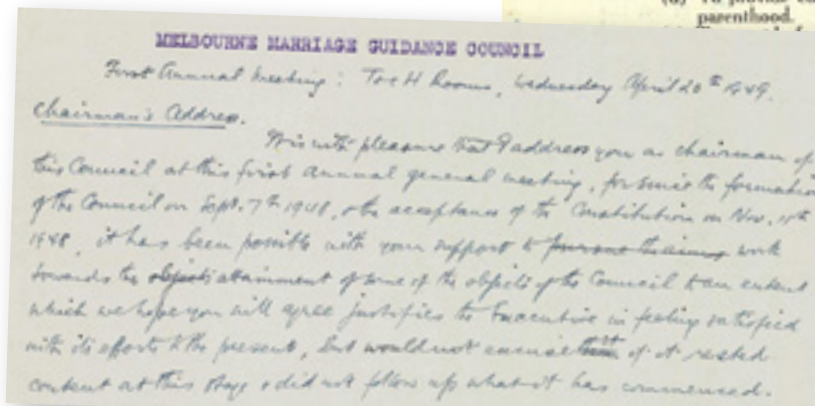
A living legacy

In 1948, as the world was emerging from the shadow of World War II, the Marriage Guidance Council of Victoria embarked on a journey that would span seven remarkable decades. Today, as Relationships Australia Victoria, affectionately known as RAV, the organisation continues to stand strong. Its impact has been profound and far-reaching, which is a testament to its unwavering commitment and innovation across the years.

From its humble beginnings, where dedicated volunteers offered guidance to couples and families navigating their relationships post-war, RAV has not only grown but thrived. It has continually adapted to the evolving needs of our dynamic society. Through eras marked by social, economic, political and technological transformation, RAV's impact on the lives of its 620,000 clients is apparent.

Reflecting on 75 years of history is no small feat, yet the essence of this journey can be distilled into three words: commitment, adaptability and impact. These words are woven into the fabric of RAV's enduring success. Since its inception, the organisation has remained resolute in its efforts to make a tangible difference in the lives of Victorians. Over three-quarters of a century, it has boldly embraced innovation, even in the face of adversity and controversy.

With this unwavering ethos, RAV has empowered Victorians to enact changes in their lives, enhance their mental health and wellbeing, and strengthen their relationships. For, at its core, RAV has always been and remains all about relationships – because nothing matters more.



Historical documents from the early years of the Marriage Guidance Council of Victoria

The trouble with modern marriage



In 1951, the prominent view was that marriages could be mended relatively easily given time and the right support early on. *The Argus*, an Australian daily morning newspaper of that era, urged couples to 'grow up and stay happily married' and advised seeking help in the early stages of problems to get back on the right track – what we would now call an early intervention approach.

By 1952, marriage guidance councils had been set up in most Australian states and territories, but the increased rate of separation and divorce had not subsided.

Despite the fact that 15 per cent of marriages were ending in divorce, the Marriage Guidance Council of Victoria Chairman, Dr William L Carrington, believed the institution of marriage was at its 'best ever'. He attributed this status to the continuing empowerment of women that had commenced during

wartime, and the resulting changes in expectations and women's rights.

'Marriage today demands a great deal more from both partners instead of far too much from one ... Because divorce is easier, married partners have to make more effort to keep their home together.'
– Dr WL Carrington (*The Herald*, 16 September 1954, p.19)

Dr Carrington believed the number one marriage problem was partners trying to boss around and manage each other, and that marriage and expectations had changed and it now required an equal partnership.

'One trouble with modern marriage', Dr Carrington said, 'is that there are still men who will not admit that the world has changed for women. They want to go on in the old way, as boss instead of partner'.

As demand continued, the Marriage Guidance Council of Victoria sought to grow. The needs of their local community, to date, had been met by operating out of the homes of volunteers and small offices in Collins Street in the CBD and Prahran.

In 1964, however, they were able to purchase their own centre outright, a grand Victorian house on Princess Street in Kew for the price of £13,200. This historic building continues to serve as RAV's largest centre to this day.



RAV's Kew centre in the 1990s

The dawn of no-fault divorce

The 1960s and 1970s had been decades of rapid, tumultuous and often divisive social transformation. The civil rights movement was born, and voices demanding women's rights and equality grew louder. Australians began to openly acknowledge and address topics that had been long ignored such as domestic violence, sexual assault and the legal recognition of Australia's First Nations peoples.

Couples began to focus more on loving and healthy relationships, rather than to see marriage as a lifelong and unbreakable contract, a radical shift for many at the time.

With the introduction of the Family Law Act in 1975, so too came the principle of 'no fault' divorce. This was a change that profoundly impacted thousands of lives. Before this, couples had to cite an accepted reason for divorce such as adultery, cruelty, insanity, desertion, habitual drunkenness or imprisonment.

With the burden of proving fault lifted, separated couples could formalise the end of their marriages without assigning blame, and those trapped in

unhealthy and unhappy marriages had an opportunity for a fresh start.

Unsurprisingly, the change brought about another surge in divorce rates, in part because couples who had been informally separated for years could more easily formalise the dissolution of their marriage. At RAV, there was a corresponding surge in requests for counselling, perhaps as couples attempted to save their marriage one last time before considering divorce. The organisation underwent a transformation of its own at this time, transitioning from a fully volunteer-based operation to being staffed by a team of dedicated professionals.



Hearing our children's voices

As the practice of mediation grew during the 1980s, it often involved matters about parenting and the care of children. While the Family Court diligently considered the welfare of children, in the late 1980s it became apparent to the Marriage Guidance Council of Victoria that a key voice was missing in decisions involving children – that of the children themselves.

The Council embraced a more holistic approach, tailoring its mediation service to meet the unique needs of each couple or family, especially when children were involved.

Pioneering what we now call child-inclusive practice, the Council forged innovative strategies to understand, advocate for and address the specific needs of children during separation and to help their parents hear their children's voices. It proved to be a powerful process for bridging the

gap between children's thoughts and experiences and parents who were sometimes too overcome by their own experiences, anger and pain to be able to hear what their children needed.

This strong commitment to hearing the voices of children and young people remains at the heart of RAV's work today, across all its services. It works to ensure the youngest members of our community are given the respect and consideration they rightfully deserve.



When the way forward is separation: a family mediation revolution



The Council's Operations Team in 1986

The 1980s marked a significant turning point for the Marriage Guidance Council, as it ventured into uncharted territory by introducing a family mediation service for separating couples. It was a move that is now known to have been fundamental to its success.

After partnering with the Legal Aid Commission of Victoria in early 1984, the Council recognised the potential of mediation services provided alongside legal services in helping separating couples and families. To spearhead this pioneering approach, one of RAV's counsellors with legal expertise embarked on a five-week visit to major cities in the United States and Canada, including San Francisco, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New York, and Vancouver. Her assignment was to discover the intricacies of mediation – a relatively foreign concept in Australia, but one that had already made waves across North America.

During their travels, they observed firsthand the Los Angeles court system's skillful use of mediation. They completed three professional mediation courses, engaged in sessions with leading mediators of the time, and even had the privilege of meeting the renowned mediation expert, John Haynes, who had authored the sole textbook on the subject available in Australia.

Armed with newfound knowledge and skills, they returned to Australia ready to introduce family mediation in a landscape where it was, for many, a radical and unfamiliar notion. Some of those unfamiliar with the concept mistook the term mediation to be 'meditation' or 'medication,' while

others argued that RAV should 'stick to its knitting' of counselling to support couples to stay together. However, RAV knew that for some couples, staying together was not necessarily the best option and that these couples needed support to effectively manage the end of relationships, and for parents, their future co-parenting relationship.

The Council invested in a considerable process to train all its counselling staff to be able to deliver mediation services, working closely with legal services. This collaborative relationship focus endures to this day, and was key to the establishment of RAV's currently delivered property mediation and conciliation service for court-ordered clients on behalf of the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia, named AccessResolve.

Fast-forward to 2005, and the transformative potential of mediation, also now known as family dispute resolution, was abundantly clear even beyond the Council. Changes to the *Family Law Act 1975 (Cth)* meant that any parents wishing to proceed to court in relation to disputes around the care of their children must first make a 'genuine attempt' to resolve their dispute through family dispute resolution.

Undoubtedly, introducing mediation was challenging in its early days. There was resistance within the

social services and legal sectors, and mediators often needed to navigate and safely manage complex issues related to power imbalances and violence.

By the mid-1980s, the organisation began evaluating its work and sharing service outcomes. It quickly became a respected voice in policy discussions and a leader in mediation service delivery. Mediation training was introduced into the existing professional training department; thereby, bolstering the capacity of the family law and other sectors to deliver mediation.

In 1988, a mediation briefing between RAV and the then Attorney-General of Australia, Lionel Bowen AC, proved pivotal. What was initially scheduled to be a 10-minute meeting evolved into an impactful hour-long conversation. Convinced of the immense value of family mediation, the attorney-general made a groundbreaking decision to provide substantial, ongoing funding for the service.

With the advent of federal funding, RAV expanded this service, enabling it to support a significantly larger clientele. In turn, separating couples gained access to a more timely, cost-effective and less stressful way to settle their disputes, enabling them to avoid adversarial court processes.

Today, RAV is one of Victoria's largest providers of family dispute resolution, and a national leader in knowledge and program development in this area, which is a testament to the enduring impact of its pioneering efforts in the 1980s.

Word search

Find the words listed below to reveal a hidden message from RAV. Words can be placed horizontally, vertically or diagonally. Answers on page 8.

O U R T I N N O V A T I O N H A
 N K C S T O O R F U M N D I N
 R E L A T I O N S H I P S G B O
 S D I E R S S T A K E A H O L D
 E C E C L I E N T S R C S P A R
 V T O N F E N R A A G T E N C I
 E E S M A S T G A F F F W M E M
 N B E R M S S C R E S P E C T O
 T L L E I U A G U E S B L O A R
 Y D C O L P N M E Q U A L I T Y
 F M U N Y P I I T Y A N B D O U
 I R C L I O E N T T S W E H O H
 V A V E T R R U S Y T E I D R A
 E G R O W T H V F O R S N U P P
 A D A P T A B I L I T Y G O R T

RESPECT
 SEVENTYFIVE
 ADAPTABILITY
 SUPPORT
 EQUALITY
 CARING
 CLIENTS
 INNOVATION
 IMPACT
 SAFE
 GROWTH
 COMMUNITY
 FAMILY
 WELLBEING
 RELATIONSHIPS

Letters to the editor A new name for a new future

Have feedback on your experience with Relationships Australia Victoria? Share your story with us at feedback@rav.org.au

To the editor;

I moved to Melbourne from the country when I was young and moved in with my boyfriend. He was charismatic and manipulative and over time a dark side began to surface in him. Eventually, the relationship became violent – both physically and emotionally – and I became isolated from friends and family, having to hide my interactions with them from my partner. I couldn't work out why I didn't leave and would look at myself in the mirror saying to myself,

"You're a smart, beautiful person why are you putting up with this?"

This went on for nearly five years. Eventually, I made an appointment with Relationship Australia Victoria and the counsellor helped me understand the cycle of violence [that] made so much sense to me and took away the shame of weakness that I felt. The counsellor didn't judge me or make me feel small, and I felt I could finally share what had been happening to me over the years. Seeking the support of a counsellor moved me forward when even a visit from the police [resulting] from worried neighbours didn't help. I found a strength inside me to tell this violent person to leave my life and I never looked back. I've never forgotten the power of those sessions. They were all I needed to reclaim my worth and I'm forever grateful.

– Counselling client

[My practitioner] was amazing. So supportive and professional ... she was sympathetic and understanding to what the issues were ... and she was able to help me and my ex get to a great place.

– Family dispute resolution client

When I was involved with Relationships Australia Victoria, I was absolutely stunned at the help I received, which helped me get back on my feet. The comfortable vibe and caring, listening experience were exceptional. I never thought anyone could help me as much as [my practitioner] did. Thanks a million.

– Men's case management client

Mediation helped us to settle our finances and parenting amicably without the need to involve family court and hefty solicitor costs. The most impacting for us was the course both me and my kids' father had to attend prior to mediation, provided by Relationships Australia Victoria. It was a course that taught us what our marriage breakdown and fighting were doing to the kids. That was an eye-opener and pivotal moment for both of us. We both took on board what was taught, turning our attention to our kids and making sure they were anchored in love despite what was happening between us. Eventually, we were able to co-parent and our kids, now young adults are thriving and well-grounded. Today, we come together as a family and celebrate functions together as one family united.

– Family dispute resolution client

First of all, I [am] really thankful to [my practitioners], they help me a lot. My situation was really bad. I didn't know what to say or what to do, I was really blank. The [Men's Behaviour Change Program] is really life-changing [in] the way they teach and let us follow step by step with different lessons. Through this, I learnt a lot and [am] still learning. I can see changes in me. My situation [is] getting better and better. Every lesson brings new things to learn.

– Men's behaviour change program participant

I needed help with mediation as communication in my relationship was completely broken down. I was getting nowhere in my circumstances. I reached out to Relationships Australia Victoria and was provided with relevant and helpful information. I was contacted by a family dispute resolution practitioner, who was kind and understanding. I felt heard. Their involvement helped in creating a safe space to discuss/negotiate care and financial matters related to our child, and supported me in achieving the best outcome for my child. I am very grateful for the service I have received.

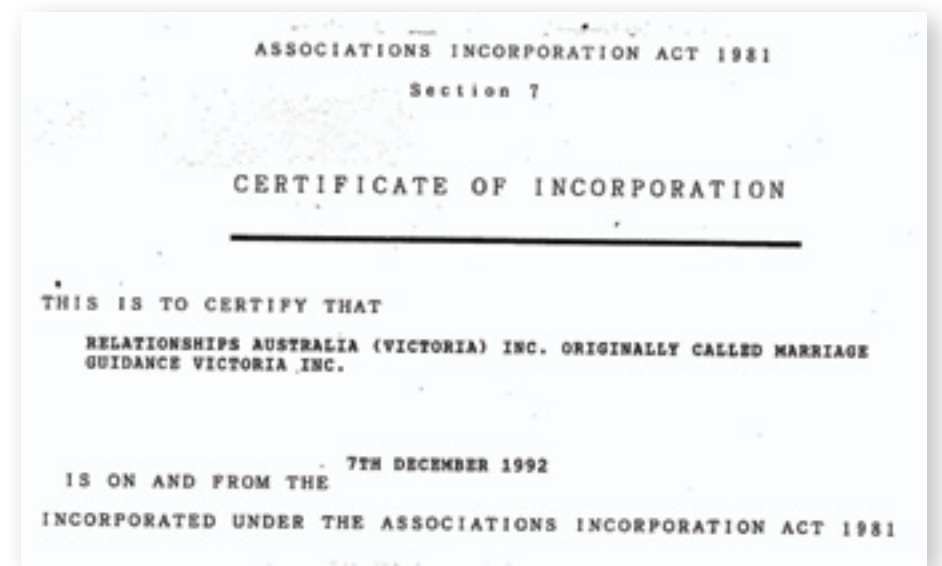
– Family dispute resolution client

Most of us who are old enough to recall the early 1990s will remember the economic recession of that time. Many Australians grappled with mounting financial and relationship pressures. Individuals and families faced the grim shadow of unemployment, redundancy and painful decisions to sell cherished family homes to make ends meet.

At the same time, within the Marriage Guidance Council of Victoria, there was an increase in the prevalence of counselling clients needing support with complex issues such as family violence, suicide and child abuse.

In response to this evolving landscape, the Council embarked on a strategic journey to diversify its services, recognising the imperative to offer appropriate, needs-focused services. This transformative era witnessed the introduction of a raft of new programs including gamblers help, telephone counselling, community education initiatives and groundbreaking family (domestic) violence services.

Some in the community saw family violence services, especially programs for male perpetrators, as controversial



or outside the organisation's scope of practice. However, the Council understood even back then that it was important work to do, in order to better support families to be safe and have respectful relationships.

No longer limited to marriage guidance alone, the Council had evolved into a multifaceted organisation with contemporary approaches, a comprehensive service portfolio, and a holistic focus on improving relationships. Its focus

was much broader than relationships between partners and spouses only, and extended to relationships between families, and within communities, and relationships individuals have with themselves.

After more than 45 years as the Marriage Guidance Council of Victoria, the organisation became incorporated and was renamed Relationships Australia Victoria and, in doing so, joined the newly formed national Relationships Australia Federation.

Specialist services to meet complex needs



Service user of RAV's Open Place Support Service for Forgotten Australians

Since its inception as a provider of post-war relationship counselling services, RAV has incorporated trauma-informed approaches to developing and delivering its services. These services have always focused on responding to the evolving needs of the community.

Between 2006 and 2018, the Victorian and Australian Governments delivered formal apologies affecting hundreds of thousands of people. These included Australians affected by institutional child sexual abuse, those who experienced abuse in out-of-home care institutions and those harmed by past forced adoption policies and practices throughout the 20th century.

As subsequent Royal Commissions and inquiries were established, it was critical to provide sensitive, trauma-informed support for those going through the complex, and often re-traumatising, process of sharing their experiences, and applying for redress and related services.

As a secular organisation without religious affiliations and no history of providing out-of-home care services, RAV was ideally placed to deliver safe,

impartial support for people affected by such traumatic experiences and to help them explore their options for redress.

Over the past decade, RAV has provided therapeutic counselling and support to thousands of Victorians through its Forced Adoption Support Service, Redress Support Services, and Disability Counselling and Support service for people engaging with the Disability Royal Commission.

The organisation also supported the early establishment of the Open Place Support Service for Forgotten Australians in 2010, before becoming the provider of the service in 2020.

For those accessing these vital services, RAV's unwavering support remains integral to their healing journeys.

Mental health matters: the road to holistic support

Just as marriage guidance was novel in the 1930s and early 1940s, mediation was a little-known concept in the 1980s, for the first three decades of RAV's existence, the term 'mental health' wasn't widely used or understood. In fact, prior to the 1970s, it was often used interchangeably with 'mental illness,' and mainly by health professionals and within the context of serious psychiatric cases. Much like marriage guidance in the 1930s and early 1940s, and mediation pre-1980s, the concept of mental health was relatively unheard of in the community.

As mental health services evolved throughout the late 20th century, and health organisations launched initiatives to promote mental health literacy, support and access, the awareness of the importance of psychological and emotional wellbeing gradually crept into the community's consciousness.

By the turn of the century, issues such as anxiety, depression and substance abuse were coming under a brighter spotlight, as their prevalence and impact became evident. Nonetheless, not everyone fully understood the complexities surrounding these issues, and discussing mental health openly remained a relatively uncommon and stigmatised practice, particularly for individuals grappling with such challenges.

By 2010, RAV had astutely identified that for many of its counselling and family dispute resolution clients, mental health needs and issues were present. As a result, the organisation embarked on a journey to meet these needs, through both existing programs and new dedicated mental health services.

In 2013, RAV introduced its i-Connect Family Mental Health Support Service for children and young people in East Gippsland who were either experiencing, or at risk of, mental health issues. This pioneering early intervention program, still operational today, acknowledges the various pressures that people under the age of 18 face. Whether it be academic challenges, interpersonal issues or family dynamics, all can culminate in mental health concerns if left unaddressed.

By actively engaging with children and young people early on, i-Connect aims to help them stay connected to education, learning, sports, recreation and their families, friends and communities in order to provide them with better access to help when needed.

Four years later, RAV took another groundbreaking step with the opening of headspace Bairnsdale, the first of three dedicated headspace services in the Gippsland region. Tailored for children and young people aged between 12 and 25 years, these services prioritise early intervention and take a holistic approach to wellbeing, offering not just mental health support but also support for physical health (including sexual health), drug and alcohol use, and work and studies. Consortiums of local services deliver the comprehensive range of services underscoring the unwavering commitment to meeting the varied needs of young people.



Out of the shadows: the recognition of family violence

The early 1990s saw the emergence of often arduous, but critically important work by RAV, and that was addressing family violence. In a population where the issue was often stigmatised, brushed under the rug or unacknowledged, the organisation's work with men who perpetrated family violence, as well as their partners, former partners and children, was met with mixed reactions.

While a range of specialist services was available to support women with safety planning and intervention orders, RAV's delivery of behaviour change programs for men divided the sector. Many thought the work was too complex and needed to be outsourced to specialist family violence organisations, while others argued that perpetrator and survivor services should not be offered in parallel because it might compromise women's safety.

RAV maintained, however, that when clients present with a need for support, assistance should be readily available, while prioritising safety, accountability and using a whole-of-family approach. The result is that over 30 years, the organisation has evolved from receiving one of the first Commonwealth funding

grants in 1993, for perpetrator programs for men, to being one of the largest providers of Men's Behaviour Change Programs in Australia in 2023.

In 2014, Rosie Batty began a courageous and relentless crusade to share her experiences of family violence, be a voice for women and children who are victim-survivors, and bring about much-needed reform. Rosie had experienced personal tragedy with the loss of her 11-year-old son, Luke, as a result of family violence at the hands of his father. Her work is credited as one of the drivers of the Victorian Government's decision to establish the Royal Commission into Family Violence to prevent family violence and improve support for victim-survivors.

Further, the Government committed to implementing all 227 recommendations, including for counselling services to understand and conduct family violence risk assessments, and for a more robust information-sharing system between organisations working with people affected by family violence. These recommendations not only validated RAV's existing work, which started nearly two decades earlier, but also affirmed its ongoing commitment to new services responding to these issues.

Since that time, RAV has pressed forward in its commitment to delivering family violence services. It developed a new, innovative Family Safety Model designed to assist all members of a family affected by family violence. Today, this model remains an integral part of the organisation's approach, and an example of its commitment to reshaping the response to family violence and reducing its prevalence.



Separating parents must make a 'genuine effort'

Another significant shift in Australia's family law began in the early 2000s. This culminated in changes, in 2005, to the Family Law Act that saw an increasing focus on the 'best interests of children' and a requirement for separating parents to make a 'genuine effort' to resolve their parenting disputes before filing matters in the Court. To accommodate this new demand, the Australian Government rolled out a nationwide initiative – the establishment of 65 Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) across the nation. These centres would be run by local services and would provide information, referrals and family dispute resolution services to those navigating the complexities of separation and divorce.

As in 1975, when the Family Law Act had last been changed, some were concerned that the new centres would make it easier for people to divorce and further degrade the value of marriage. RAV, however, saw the broader picture – that separation and divorce were realities of modern society and that FRCs would enable people to get the help they needed while keeping the best interests of their children at the forefront.

With the benefit of hindsight, the strategic decision to tender for the FRCs was undoubtedly a sound one for RAV. It also carried an inherent element of risk, as the FRCs, while aligned with the organisation's focus on relationships and supporting families in times of

distress, would be independently branded and unidentifiable as RAV services. There was also a genuine concern that the centres would divert resources away from RAV's existing services and clients.

Nevertheless, RAV chose to tender for four of the 15 FRCs in Victoria and, in doing so, demonstrated its commitment to addressing the evolving needs of clients, and to adapting and growing itself. Ultimately, this decision helped to secure the short- and medium-term success of the organisation, with the four FRCs in Sunshine, Greensborough, Berwick and Melbourne FRC now core to RAV's service offerings.



RAV operates the Berwick Family Relationship Centre

Unlocking excellence: training tomorrow's leaders

For 75 years, RAV has been at the forefront of transforming lives and nurturing relationships. While its primary mission has always been to provide direct services to clients and their families, RAV's impact extends far beyond that. It's a story of expertise, knowledge-sharing and commitment to building a brighter future.

RAV's journey in empowering professionals and workplaces through their wealth of experience spans over four decades.

What began as a focus on core knowledge – mediation and counselling from the 1980s, now includes a diverse range of professional training initiatives. RAV proudly operates a Registered Training Organisation (RTO 21977) and delivers accredited graduate diplomas, intensive courses, workshops, webinars, as well as self-paced programs.

Its reach also extends through supervision services and specialist programs, with some programs available nationwide. Collaborations and funding contracts with government bodies such

as the Victorian Government Department of Justice and Community Safety, the Victorian Government Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and the Australian Government Department of Social Services, reinforce RAV's efforts to drive positive change.

It's no surprise, therefore, that RAV's impact goes well beyond client relationships.

It's about nurturing future leaders and professionals, shaping a world where support, empathy and understanding are the cornerstones of success.

Surviving 262 days of lockdown



When COVID-19 emerged in early 2020, the world changed almost overnight. We faced fear, uncertainty, grief and loss. What we know now is that Victoria would face some of the longest and most difficult lockdowns in the world, and RAV encountered challenges never seen before in its history. Yet, in the face of uncertainty and adversity, the organisation never once stopped supporting those who needed it.

Work and life as we knew it altered overnight, and RAV had to adapt to the new reality of service delivery amid changing client needs and service access challenges. Through 262 collective days of lockdown in Victoria, RAV provided services to its clients in whatever way circumstances required, by telephone, video or face-to-face.

The delivery of remote services marked a significant shift for the organisation, which usually provided in-person services, but RAV and its dedicated staff were committed to staying available for their clients and rose to the challenge. Services were delivered first from RAV centres and then remotely from staff members' own homes as lockdowns came into effect. They navigated new technologies and complex client needs, as well as their own personal struggles to ensure their clients received the help they needed.

Financially, it was also a difficult time for the community, and this impacted both RAV and its clients with fees unable to be paid for many of the services provided. At the time, it was impossible to know how long the pandemic would go on and, consequently, how long RAV's income would be impacted by the significantly reduced fees it was receiving. The decision took a toll on RAV's finances, but the organisation was protected against serious financial consequences experienced by others in the sector, thanks to its history of sound financial management.

Its decision to prioritise service delivery and client wellbeing during COVID-19, while negotiating the associated financial constraints is a key example of how RAV maintains its commitment to providing services for all people, regardless of their individual circumstances.

Working with First Nations peoples

With an awareness of the importance of self-determination, RAV is continually developing its understanding of how best to engage with First Nations peoples and communities. For many years, it's been engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to develop understanding, trust and relationships.

RAV recognises that in any of its work with First Nations communities or organisations, its role is to contribute expertise or input when requested. It works to ensure that the delivery of its services is flexible and adaptable. It also recognises the need to develop programs in partnership with First Nations communities and organisations that are developed specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and co-facilitated by a First Nations person.



Highlights from 75 years of service



1948

A new post-war 'crisis'

After the end of World War II, there was immense relief as families reunited and uncertainty abated. However, a new challenge revealed itself, as couples and families struggled to adjust and re-establish their relationships in a new post-war world, and the number of marriage breakdowns increased. In response, Melbourne's first Marriage Guidance Council was established by clergy, doctors and volunteers to support struggling couples and families facing challenges.

1955

The dawn of government support

The Council's early years relied on generous donations from the public to fund the services provided. These were primarily conducted from volunteers' homes. In 1955, the Council received its first government grant of \$1,500 from the Minister of Health.

1964

First centre purchased

In 1964, the Marriage Guidance Council purchased its first centre in Kew. It was a grand Victorian house at 46 Princess Street, and today it is still the organisation's largest service location.



1975

A changing landscape: 'No-fault' divorce

The Family Law Act enacted the principle of no-fault divorce, resulting in a substantial increase in divorces across Australia. The Council responded to their highest number of counselling enquiries to date.

Late 1970s

The professionalisation of a workforce

The increased demand for counselling services led to the increasing professionalism of the Council, as it evolved from a primarily volunteer-based workforce to a professional counsellor workforce.



1984

Pioneering mediation

The increased divorce rate had not abated, and the Council identified a growing need to support separating couples with their family law disputes. Following research internationally, and amid considerable opposition and criticism from some parts of the community and sector, the organisation introduced a new service, known as mediation, to Australia.

1986–1988

Leading training in and beyond the sector

As their Family Mediation Service grew, so too did demand for the service within and beyond the Council. In response, the Council established a mediation training program to support the training of counsellors and lawyers facilitating mediation. Not long after, the Council delivered its inaugural couples counselling training program, which is still delivered almost 40 years later as the Specialist Course in Integrative Couple Therapy.



1993

Family violence program introduced

The Council was one of the first organisations to be funded by the Commonwealth Government to provide family violence prevention. The Council's innovative approach worked separately with perpetrators, and their partners and children to ensure safety, prevent violence and promote respectful relationships.



1994

A new name for a new future

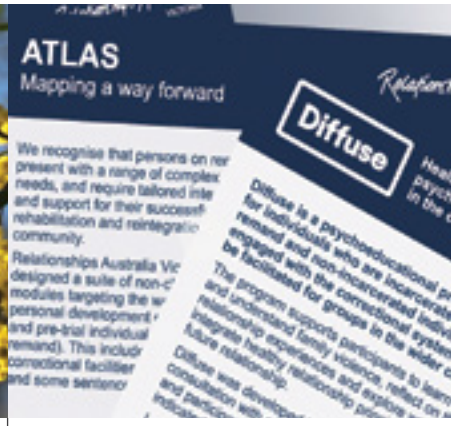
In recognition of its increasingly diverse range of services, the organisation was renamed to Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV), and joined as a member of the Relationships Australia national federation.

Early 2000s

Additional funding for family violence services, and an evolving counselling service

Increased funding for family violence services enabled RAV to provide men's behaviour change programs, and support for women, children and families more widely.

The organisation's original counselling service had changed significantly since its inception 50 years beforehand, with therapeutic approaches diversified, an increasing focus on whole-of-family and a commitment to working with individuals and families, as well as couples.



2012

Property mediation through the courts
The early to mid 2010s saw RAV introduce a range of new programs. In March 2012, RAV began providing its AccessResolve property mediation and conciliation service for court-ordered clients, on behalf of the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia.

2013–2015

Focusing on children, young people and mental health
RAV has consistently placed the safety and wellbeing of children at the forefront of its work, and it recognises the importance of prevention and early intervention services. Recognising the strong connection between healthy relationships, the prevention of family violence and mental health, RAV began actively pursuing funding for child and family services. In 2013, it successfully tendered to deliver i-Connect, a Family Mental Health Support Service for children and young people in East Gippsland. It unveiled its pioneering 'I like, like you' (now called Respect and Connect) healthy relationships program for schools, followed by its 'early matters' healthy family relationships program in 2015. RAV also began providing Forced Adoption Support Services.

2016

Prioritising safety for all family members
RAV has long been aware of the importance of providing systemic responses to family violence, and formalised and enhanced this understanding with the development of a new Family Safety Model of practice for working with all family members affected by family violence. It delivered an increasing number of men's behaviour change programs to respond to the growing community awareness of family violence and the need for support.

2017–2020

Dedicated mental health services introduced
The organisation successfully applied to operate as the lead agency of headspace Bairnsdale in 2017, before successfully tendering to operate headspace Wonthaggi and headspace Sale, which opened in 2018 and 2020, respectively.

2019–2020

Trauma-informed services
Adding to its suite of trauma-informed services, RAV began providing services for those impacted by the East Gippsland bushfires, which occurred in 2019 and 2020, as well as support services for individuals affected by the Disability Royal Commission. Also in 2020, RAV became the provider of the Open Place Support Service for Forgotten Australia/Pre-1990 Care Leavers.

2020

The beginning of a pandemic
As COVID-19 and lockdowns dramatically altered day-to-day life, so too the availability and accessibility of services were impacted. In response, we quickly pivoted from primarily face-to-face services, to a hybrid model of in-person and telehealth services. Across the pandemic years, we continued our work to meet client needs without ceasing services for a single day.

2022–2023

Intersectionality and a training leader
Recognising that mental health, family law and family violence issues often intersect, RAV welcomed the opportunity to deliver new mental health support through Victoria Legal Aid's Family Advocacy and Support Services at all Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia circuit locations. Significant growth extended RAV's training and development offerings to include nationally accredited graduate diplomas and courses, a workshop and webinar program, self-paced courses, clinical supervision, leadership coaching and specialised contracted programs. In 2023, the milestone year of its 75th anniversary, the organisation released its inaugural Social Impact Report, and accompanying 'How we create change' animation. The report illustrates the real, measurable difference of RAV's, not just in the short term, but also in creating lasting, positive impacts that ripple out to families and entire communities, across generations.

Growth across a lifetime

From 1948 to 2023: the growth and evolution of Relationships Australia Victoria.

THEN

- Volunteer-based
- Marriage guidance and education
- Operated from volunteers' homes
- Response-focused
- Reliant on donations
- Limited income

NOW

- 400+ employees
- 140+ diverse services and programs
- 21 sites, additional outreach locations and telehealth
- Prevention, early intervention and tertiary services
- Australian and Victorian Government-funded
- Over \$46.1 million income in 2023/24

2006

Family Relationship Centres
RAV strategically decided to tender for four Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) that were part of a national Australian Government initiative, following changes to the Family Law Act. The centres, which still operate today, provide couples and families experiencing divorce with information, referrals, and an affordable and timely family dispute resolution service focused on resolving parenting and property family law disputes.

2008

Training a new generation of mediators and counsellors
In response to a growing sector-wide need for qualified family dispute resolution practitioners, RAV became a Registered Training Organisation and began providing nationally accredited training, including a CHC81115 Graduate Diploma of Family Dispute Resolution, and later its CHC81015 Graduate Diploma of Relationship Counselling.

2009

Inclusion as a priority
RAV has long been committed to inclusion, and supporting and celebrating diversity. It increased its focus on providing accessible, inclusive services to all members of the community. This includes First Nations peoples, people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people from LGBTIQ+ communities and people with disability.

Celebrating diversity: inclusion at the core

RAV recognises and celebrates the rich tapestry of Victoria's diverse communities.

At the heart of its work lies a strong belief that every individual deserves to live with safety and dignity, and enjoy fulfilling and respectful relationships. With this commitment, RAV strives to provide services that are safe, deeply inclusive and accessible to everyone, regardless of religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural heritage or economic status.

RAV openly embraces diversity, welcoming with open arms people

who are vulnerable or disadvantaged, individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, members of LGBTIQ+ communities and people with disability. It recognises that every person's unique journey deserves respect and understanding, and services that are delivered flexibly, to ensure they meet individual needs.



A decade of growth and transformation



RAV CEO, Dr Andrew Bickerdike

Over the past 10 years, Relationships Australia Victoria has transformed. It has diversified its services, opened six new service locations and secured additional funding revenue. RAV now delivers 144 services and training programs from 21 core service locations, plus additional outreach sites and telehealth. With a service breadth of that scale, it is impossible to summarise its offerings, and instead easier to highlight some of its most recently introduced programs that are indicative of its skills and expertise.

They include its 'early matters' early intervention parenting programs, its Respect and Connect healthy relationships, gender equality and mental wellbeing program for schools, and the free mental health component of the Family Advocacy and Support

Services, for individuals who are navigating the complexities of family law courts and are affected by family violence. RAV has also opened a specialised family violence service centre in south-east Melbourne, renewed its men's behaviour change

program, and implemented a men's case management service and developed new support groups for perpetrators and survivors.

RAV's pursuit of community wellbeing shows no signs of abating. It remains agile, responsive and committed to meeting the evolving needs of the community it serves. In another 75 years, the world will be a different place; however, Relationships Australia Victoria will, no doubt, be willing and able to respond to the needs of the community at that time.

THANK YOU

Relationships Australia Victoria gratefully acknowledges the grants and other support it receives from a wide range of funding bodies, organisations and services, including from the following.

Australian Government

Attorney-General's Department
Department of Social Services
Department of Health

Victorian Government

Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
Department of Justice and Community Safety

Gippsland Primary Health Network

Victoria Legal Aid

For more than 75 years, this support has enabled us to deliver high quality services that have changed the lives of our clients, their families and communities for the better.

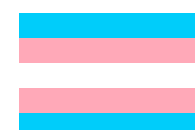
From the staff, management team and Board of Relationships Australia Victoria, thank you.

Relationships Australia®
VICTORIA

Word search answers

O U R T I N N O V A T I O N H A
N K C S T O O U R F U M N D I N
R E L A T I O N S H I P S G B O
S D I E R S S T A K E A H O L D
E C E C L I E N T S R C S P A R
V T O N F E N R A A G T E N C I
E E S M A S T G A F F W M E M
N B E R M S S C R E S P E C T O
T L L E I U A G U E S B L O A R
Y D C O L P N M E Q U A L I T Y
F M U N Y P I T Y A N B D O U
I R C L I O E N T T S W E H O H
V A V E T R R U S Y T E I D R A
E G R O W T H V F O R S N U P P
A D A P T A B I L I T Y G O R T

HIDDEN MESSAGE: OUR THANKS TO OUR FUNDING BODIES, STAKEHOLDERS, PARTNER AGENCIES, STAFF MEMBERS, COLLEAGUES, BOARD, COMMUNITY AND OUR CLIENTS WHO HAVE TRUSTED RAV FOR SUPPORT.



Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waterways of Australia. We support Aboriginal people's right to self-determination and culturally safe services. RAV is 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.

RAV recognises the lifelong impacts of childhood trauma. RAV recognises those who had children taken away from them.

RAV is committed to inclusivity and providing safe, inclusive and accessible services for all people. RAV welcomes members of LGBTQIA+ communities to its organisation.

Some stock photos are used in this publication for illustrative purposes only. No association between the person/s pictured and the subject matter of the report is intended.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this publication may contain images of people who may have since passed away.