

Annual Impact Report for Family Relationships Services Programs



Welcome

Relationships Australia provides a range of services, including counselling, dispute resolution, children's services, services for victims and perpetrators of family violence, services for older people, and relationship and professional education. We aim to support all people in Australia to live with positive and respectful relationships.

Funded nationally by the Attorney-General's Department, services provided by Relationships Australia under the Family Relationships Services Program (FRSP) provide critical support for families navigating separation and divorce.

This report delves into services we provide nationally under the FRSP, exploring the impact our Federation has on individuals, families and communities through a selection of case studies and data. Within these pages, you'll encounter real stories of families who have navigated relationship breakdown and sought guidance and support from Relationships Australia. These case studies offer intimate glimpses into the challenges faced by parents and children, and how our interventions have made a tangible difference in their lives.

Complementing these narratives, we present data collected across the country which not only validates our approaches but also provides insights into the evolving needs of families in crisis. From counselling to mediation, the numbers tell a story of lives improved and futures brightened.

Our child-focused approach has been a cornerstone of our work since inception. Through both qualitative and quantitative analysis, we demonstrate how prioritising children's wellbeing during separation leads to better outcomes for the entire family unit.

As a community service organisation, we've adapted to meet the changing dynamics of Australian families. This report showcases how our inclusive approach has allowed us to effectively support diverse family structures, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic circumstances.

By examining our FRSP services through the lens of measurable impact, we not only celebrate our achievements but also chart a course for the future. We invite you to explore the evidence of our enduring commitment to supporting Australian families through these challenging times.

Snapshot of our service delivery in 2023-24 Australia wide:



What services are provided under the Family Relationships Services Program

As just one of the many critical programs delivered across the country by Relationships Australia, the Family Relationships Services Program (FRSP) focuses on families who are at risk of separating, or who have separated and aims to improve the wellbeing of families, children and communities. FRSP services are funded by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department and include information and referral, support, education and skills training, counselling, dispute resolution, supervised change-over and contact, outreach, community capacity building and development.

This impact report explores a selection of services funded under the FRSP, and related services to support families as they navigate these significant changes, improve parenting skills and prepare parents for productive co-parenting relationships. In doing so, it adopts a holistic view of the types of services and supports needed by separating and separated families and explores the mechanisms by which those families can be empowered to thrive.

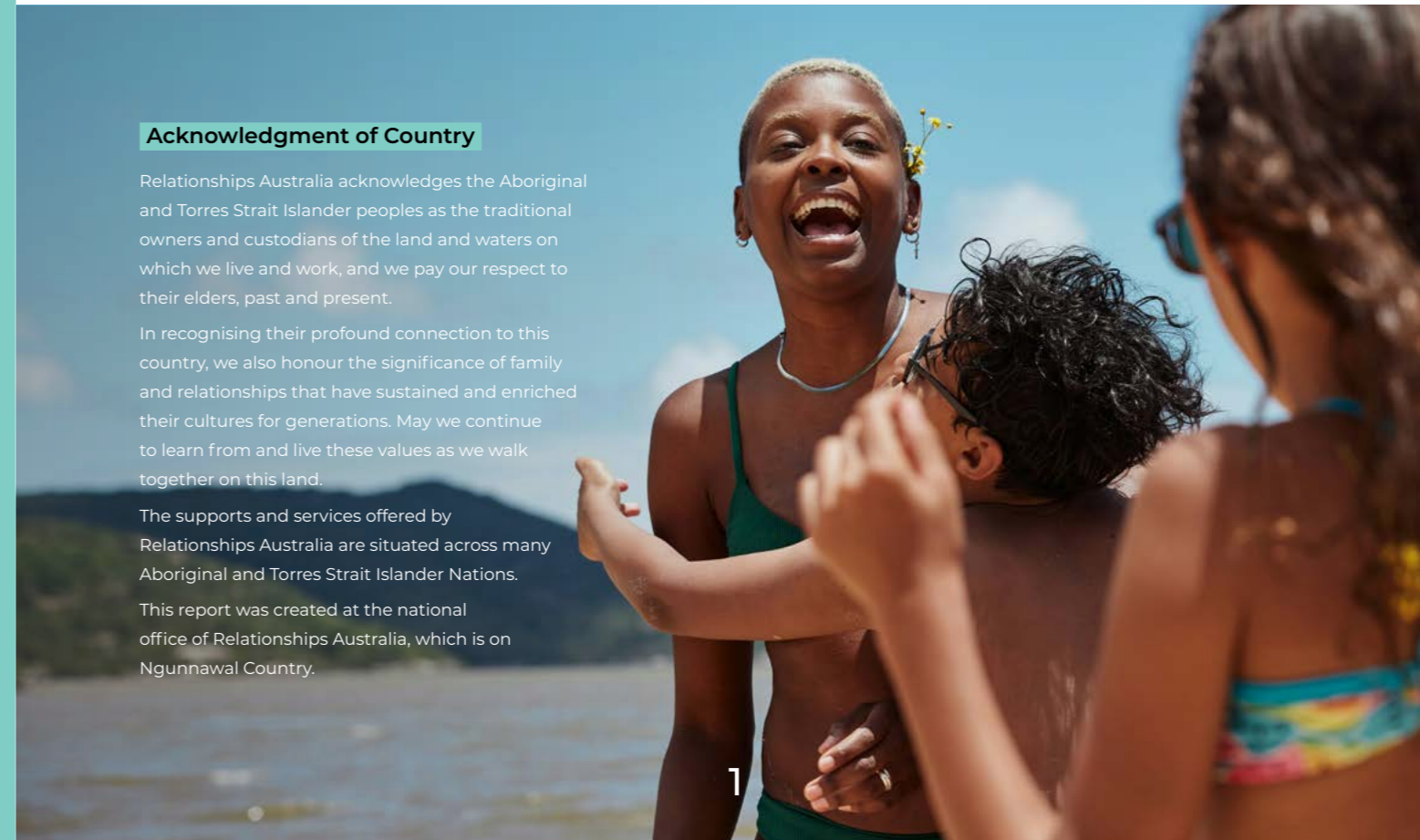
Acknowledgment of Country

Relationships Australia acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional owners and custodians of the land and waters on which we live and work, and we pay our respect to their elders, past and present.

In recognising their profound connection to this country, we also honour the significance of family and relationships that have sustained and enriched their cultures for generations. May we continue to learn from and live these values as we walk together on this land.

The supports and services offered by Relationships Australia are situated across many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations.

This report was created at the national office of Relationships Australia, which is on Ngunnawal Country.



Understanding our impact

Social impact refers to the influence we have on individuals, families and communities that occurs as a result of engagement with our programs. While there are clear legal and economic benefits arising from our programs, many of which are reported regularly pursuant to contractual requirements, this report focuses on the unique role we play as a relationship service. By focusing on relationships throughout the process, we create enduring and life-changing impacts that benefit families for generations. While our services operate in complex family and community settings, and their impact is multifaceted and wide-reaching, we have used this report to focus on 3 key domains:

Domain 1	Domain 2	Domain 3
<p>Families are supported to achieve their goals and feel satisfied with the process</p>	<p>Services are tailored and appropriate to meet the family where they are</p>	<p>Children are centred through the separation process</p>

How we create change

Relationships Australia believes that individuals have the capacity to change how they relate to others. For 75 years we've worked with people, couples, families and communities to help them manage conflict and change, improve their circumstances and achieve positive and respectful relationships. This report focuses on how our skilled, culturally-responsive and child-focused practitioners support families to reach durable agreements, by developing conflict resolution skills and prioritising child wellbeing. Ultimately, this supports healthy family functioning and long-term resilience.

Across these services, change happens through three key drivers

Driver 1 Highly skilled practitioners create trusting and safe environments for change

Our practitioners create a space in which families feel heard and understood. Practitioners manage complex dynamics efficiently, generating trusting relationships with clients. This leaves clients feeling satisfied with the process, regardless of the agreement outcome.

Driver 2 Autonomy through the process

This environment produces a sense of autonomy for clients. Although some are mandated to attend, families find the service accessible, engaging and child-focused. This self-determination over the process means that agreements are more likely to be adhered to.

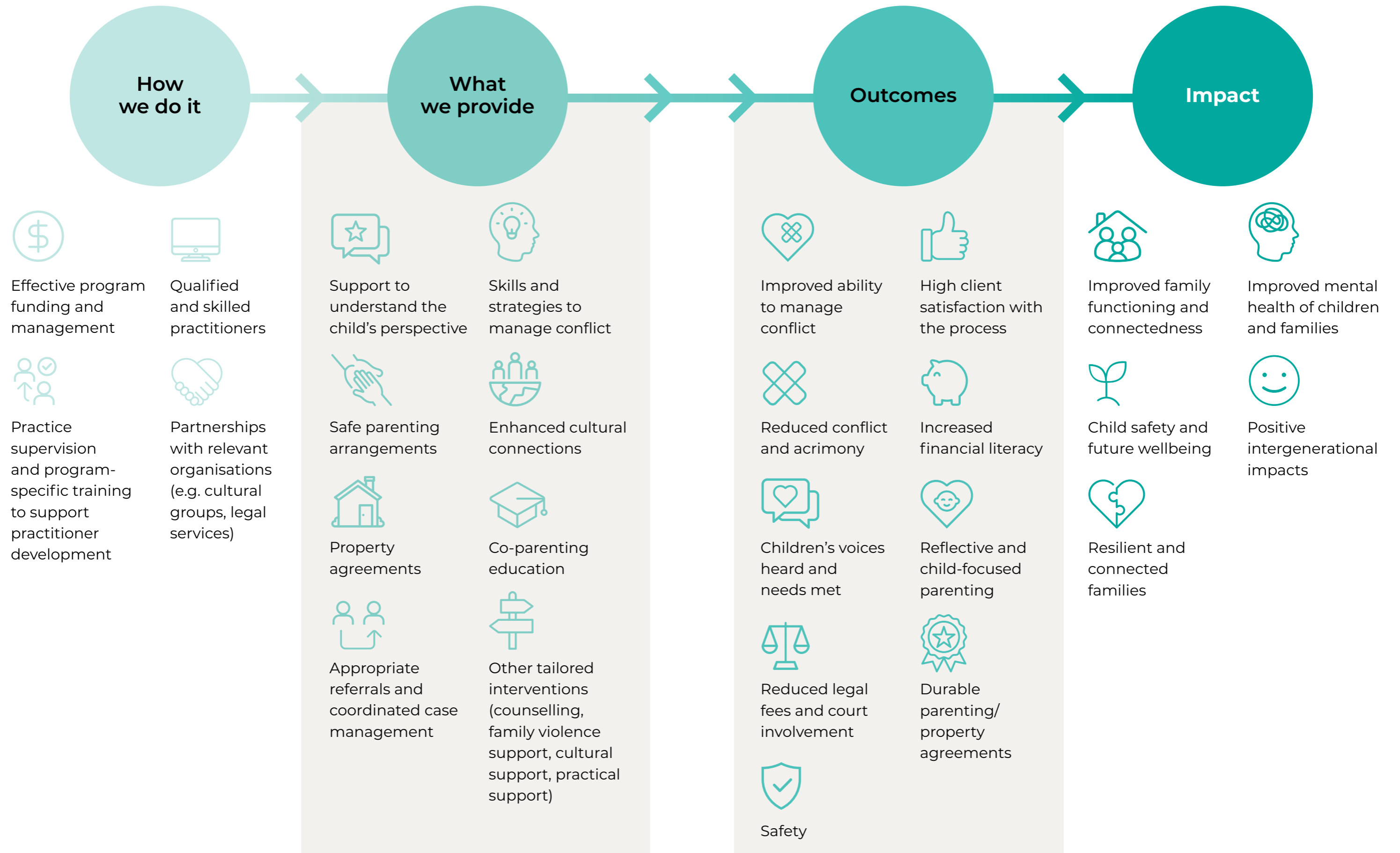
Driver 3 Improved relationships and family functioning


Families connect better with themselves, their children and each other. Often, a range of complementary services have supported them to address trauma and better understand their previous conflicts. Conflict is reduced, mental health improves, and families understand how to manage challenging situations and relationships.

Change happens when families are supported by highly skilled practitioners to manage difficult situations. They gain a sense of control over a stressful experience, feeling satisfied with the outcomes. They leave with new skills and strategies to support them through future challenges.



Theory of Change





Families are supported to achieve their goals and feel satisfied with the process

Using dispute resolution processes to improve parenting, family functioning and safety, leading to greater wellbeing for all

Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) at the Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) operated by Relationships Australia, and funded by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department aims to support adults, children, young people and families to respond to ongoing challenges and adverse events in their lives in ways that are safe, build healthy relationships, sustain cultural and community connection and achieve the goals of families. FDR is a unique form of mediation that helps separating families to come to their own agreements. During FDR families will discuss the issues in dispute and consider different options, while being encouraged to focus on the needs of their children.

Attending court for family-related matters can be time-consuming, expensive, stressful and have long-term impacts on one's ability to effectively communicate and problem-solve with their former partner. FDR supports separating families to achieve workable parenting

and property arrangements through information, referral, support and family dispute resolutions services outside the court. By resolving post separation disputes relating to children and property in a child-focused manner, FDR improves postseparation relationships by enhancing conflict management skills and involving everyone in the decision-making process. This improves the chances that the agreement will last into the future and reduces conflict in families.

Research by members of the Relationships Australia Federation has shown that even in cases of ambivalence towards the process, where members only attend due to a legal requirement, parties nevertheless derive benefit from participation through reduced acrimony, satisfaction with the process, and reaching some level of agreement (Heard et. al., 2024).

In 2023-24, Family Dispute Resolution services provided by Relationships Australia across the country supported over:

14,000+
Clients

40,000+
Sessions

Complexity in families:

A focus on helping families establish positive habits and interaction patterns supports the development of better parent and child relationships. Using a trauma informed approach, FRC services provide counselling to support families who have been impacted by family violence and abuse.

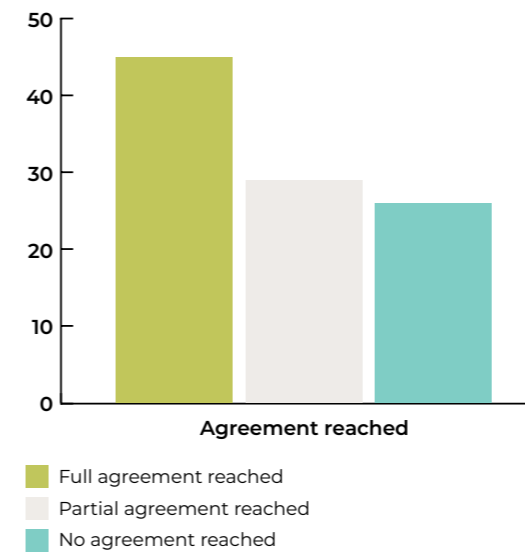
Data collected by Relationships Australia South Australia (RASA), shows that approximately 15% of clients have an active intervention order. At intake to the service, 16% of clients had previously taken their dispute to court, 4% had ongoing child protection investigations, with significant involvement of statutory authorities due to both self and other partner behaviour.

How RASA creates safety and immediate outcomes for families:



Outcomes

Table 1: Financial agreements reached in FRC services



All family members are involved in the decision

Of the clients attending FRCs, 45% reached full parenting/financial agreements and 29% reached partial agreements. 26% were unable to reach an agreement due to safety or other concerns.

In 22% of cases, a Section 60i Certificate was issued. This indicated that either an agreement was not possible (57%), one party did not attend (18%), or it was inappropriate or unsafe for mediation (25%). Notably, no Section 60i Certificates were issued for lack of genuine effort by attending parties. This suggests that FDR practitioners are effectively able to use the process to support reluctant parties to engage, where they otherwise may not have.

Case study: Highly skilled practitioners are able to hold space for complex matters

A four-way mediation matter concerning the care arrangement of one child.



Greg

Biological father. Initiated FDR requesting access to the child after the separation of Nadiah and Philipa.



Nadiah

Biological mother, previously in same-sex relationship with Philipa. Had equal care arrangement. Distressed by the prospect of her time with the child being further reduced.



Philipa

Previously in same-sex relationship with Nadiah.

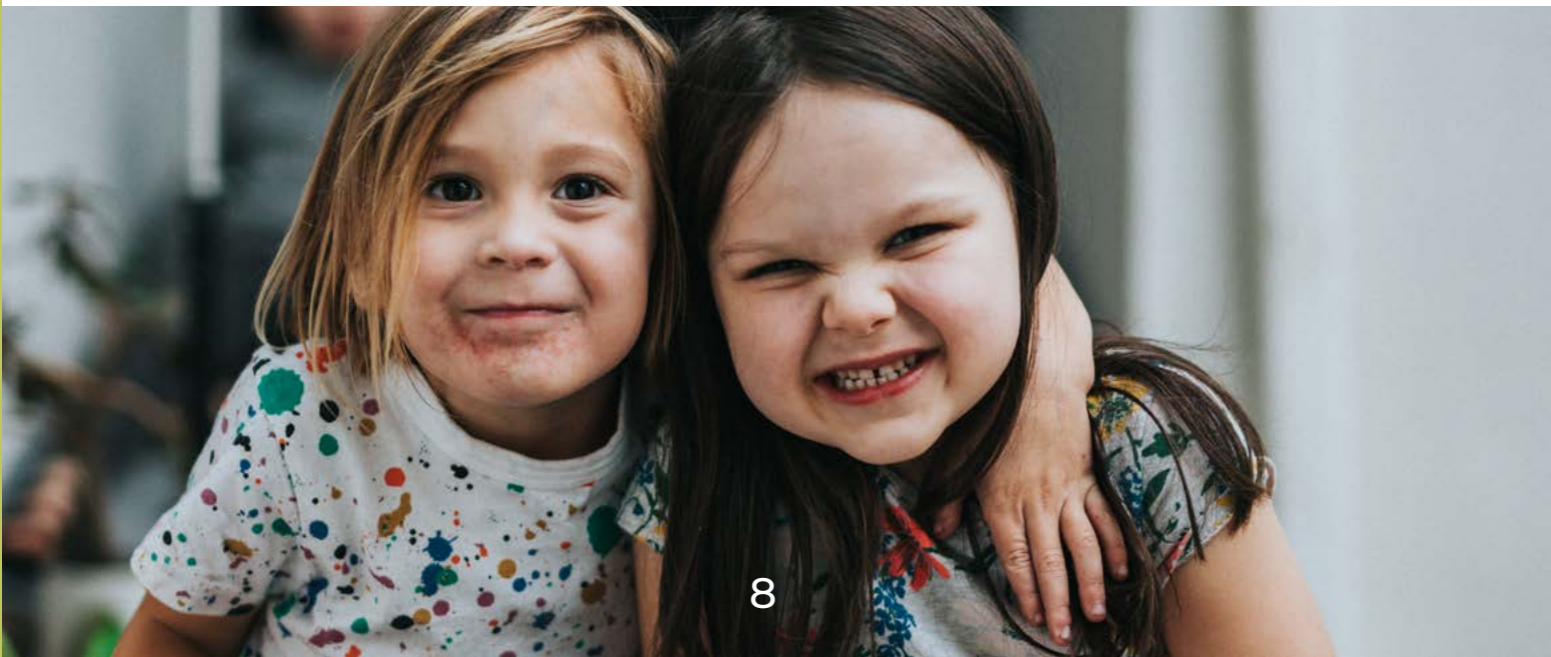


Carlos

Partner of Greg. Also requesting time with the child.

The service conducted multiple intake sessions to thoroughly understand the relationship of each parent with the child and consider each parent's desire to spend time with the child in weighing up what would be in the best interests of the child themselves. Subsequently, multiple joint mediation sessions were performed to allow open discussion and sharing of different proposals. An agreement was reached in which all parties were satisfied. The agreement ensured that Nadiah's

time with the child remained protected and that Philipa's time would be shared with Greg. Carlos would also spend time with the child in the form of attending and transporting them to sports activity and school. All this was achieved by employing great sensitivity to the relationship of each party to the child, while at the same time achieving stability and promoting the child's needs as a priority. The outcome was favourable to all parties, and most importantly, to the child.



Clients are very satisfied with the process

88%

of FRC clients were satisfied with the service they received

91%

felt listened to by the service

75%

agreed they were better off after attending the service

75%

of improvement is due to the service when better off

"My practitioner was awesome. She had knowledge of family law and she understood the outcome I'm looking for through mediation".

"[The practitioner] was respectful and clear in her communication. I felt listened to and I had confidence that she will be able to help us come to a manageable parenting agreement".

Families are better off after mediation despite significant family wellbeing and safety risks

Analyses show that FRC clients arrive with significant safety and wellbeing concerns. Despite these risks, many make significant improvement in key domains over the course of their engagement:

Parenting

33%

sometimes or often found it difficult to set limits and deal with child's problem behaviour, but 18% said their parenting improved after the service

Child well-being

28%

said their school-aged child was behaving in concerning ways, but 33% said their children were coping better after the service

Safety in relationships

22%

of clients were afraid for their safety at the time of first attending the service but 48% felt safer after using the service

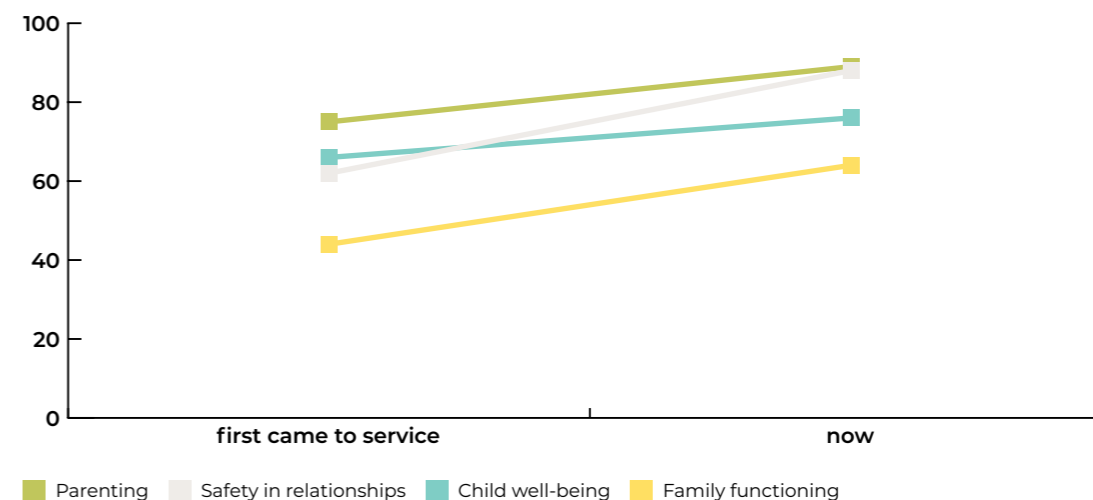
Family functioning

20%

sometimes or often found it difficult to support their child(ren)'s activities and interests, but 45% said family functioning improved after service

However, improvements on key domains are found for all FRC clients – even those who don't report such concerns at their first appointment. Table 2 shows average change over time when clients are asked to reflect back on key safety and wellbeing domains:

Table 2: Family and child safety and wellbeing measures



A photograph of a man with a beard and short hair, smiling broadly while holding a young child with curly hair. The child is laughing joyfully. They are outdoors, with green foliage in the background.

Families are supported to achieve their goals and feel satisfied with the process

Creating self-determination and positive outcomes for court mandated mediation clients

AccessResolve is a property dispute resolution service for court-ordered clients operated by Relationships Australia Victoria, with funding from the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department.

Property cases make up a large percentage of the cases before the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia each year, creating a growing backlog of cases.

AccessResolve uses a lawyer-assisted conciliation model, where practitioners adopt an advisory role to assist parties to reach agreement, and lawyers are active participants in the process. Lawyer-assisted mediation can help separating couples with more complex needs, for whom standard mediation would not be appropriate. Receiving legal advice during a mediation supports parties to reach an agreement in more complex cases.

AccessResolve consistently achieves high settlement rates of 70% or more each year, which is above the settlement rate of traditional family dispute resolution (FDR) services. These results are more significant given AccessResolve cases are arguably among the more intractable as clients have already filed matters in court and have often waited for some time to attend court before being ordered to attempt conciliation.

“Receiving legal advice during a mediation supports parties to reach an agreement in more complex cases”

Outcomes

A key feature of the AccessResolve program is that clients are court mandated. It has been hypothesised that the mandatory nature of the service may impact client outcomes. However, our analysis shows that key features of regular, voluntary family

dispute resolution, such as the principles of practitioner impartiality and client self-determination, are maintained under a court ordered conciliation model.

Client satisfaction is high even if the desired outcome isn't achieved

Relationships Australia surveys clients participating in AccessResolve. The results reveal that:

78%

of respondents were 'very much' or 'somewhat' satisfied with the way their conciliation was carried out.

These results suggest that for many clients, experiences of conciliation are positive even when the desired outcome is not achieved. This is further demonstrated in feedback from clients who did not reach a settlement through AccessResolve but still reflected positively on the service: 'Mediator was great. I'm sad to not resolve the issues in this way.'

69%

of respondents were 'very much' or 'somewhat' satisfied with their conciliation outcome.

Clients were particularly satisfied with practitioners. For example, almost all respondents (97%) agreed that 'the practitioner offered helpful information and advice'.

Practitioner impartiality creates trust in the service

The vast majority (90%) of clients felt that their practitioner was 'very much' (69%) or 'somewhat' (21%) impartial and even handed. Interview participants –

including those who did not reach a settlement – also spoke positively about practitioners' fairness:

'I think he was really impartial, which was really good, and he made it very clear that he wasn't sort of interested in what had gone on before. It was just about now and trying to get this sorted, which I thought was good.'
[Client, assets of \$100K-\$199K]

Client self-determination supports greater compliance with settlements

Clients' capacity to direct their own outcomes is known as self-determination. Studies suggest that separating individuals who feel they have influence over their post-separation arrangements are more likely to feel that the arrangements are fair, and to comply with them. When clients were asked whether they were able to express their point of view during the AccessResolve process, a clear majority (82%) felt that this was 'very much' (52%) or 'somewhat' (31%) true.

- No clients interviewed felt that their practitioner exerted too much influence during negotiations.

- Some interviewees described a strong sense of self-determination in the process, though others felt they lacked control when faced with a limited range of realistic outcomes.

'I'm very grateful that there is this process. I'm really thankful for that because it has reduced a lot of nastiness, a lot of time and a lot of expense. So, for that, I think it's fantastic.' [Client, settled, assets of \$1M or more]

You can sort it out now or get a judge to decide, and if a judge decides, you don't really know what will happen, whereas, through mediation, you have a bit of control.' [Client, no settlement reached, assets of \$100K-\$199K]

Lawyers further advance client's sense of self-determination over the process

The AccessResolve model can involve advice from both practitioners and parties' lawyers. While such input could theoretically reduce clients' sense of self-determination, over 92% of respondents agreed that having their lawyer present in conciliation was 'somewhat' or 'very much' helpful.

The majority of clients interviewed also felt that their lawyers were supportive of the conciliation process and that preparing for conciliation was much easier with the help of a lawyer:

'I was very involved with my lawyer all the way leading up to this... and he was fantastic.' [Client, settled, assets of \$500K-999K]



Services are tailored and appropriate to meet the family where they are

Engaging clients over the phone to support them with dispute resolution, crisis support and legal advice

The Family Relationship Advice Line (FRAL) is a national telephone-based service providing information, referral and advice to assist families affected by separation or relationship issues. This can include dispute resolution services, crisis response and legal advice and information. FRAL is funded as part of the FRSP by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department and is operated by Relationships Australia Queensland. FRAL is a critical entry point to family law services, providing seamless service entry across four distinct components:

- First Point of Contact (**FPOC**) including Information, Advice and Referral
- Family Relationship Advisors (**FRA**)
- Telephone and Online Dispute Resolution Service (**TODRS**)
- Legal Advice Service (**LAS**)

Clients access all these services through a single phone call. People contact FRAL at times of significant stress – this includes family separation, interactions with the child protection system, family violence (engagement with state protection jurisdictions), elder abuse, international child abduction, disputes arising around child support and property issues. Cases can be highly complex, including, for example, clients who are incarcerated. Co-occurring issues such as domestic and family violence, child abuse and neglect, substance misuse and addictions, and poor mental health may also be identified and lead to referrals from FRAL to other services and agencies. The data in this report was collected during 2022-2023FY.

46,240

Calls answered by the Advice Line

13,046

Families referred to Family Relationship Advisors

613

Mediations with the Telephone and Online Dispute Resolution Service

5,935

Sessions with the Legal Advice Service

The Client Journey when they call the Family Relationship Advice Line:

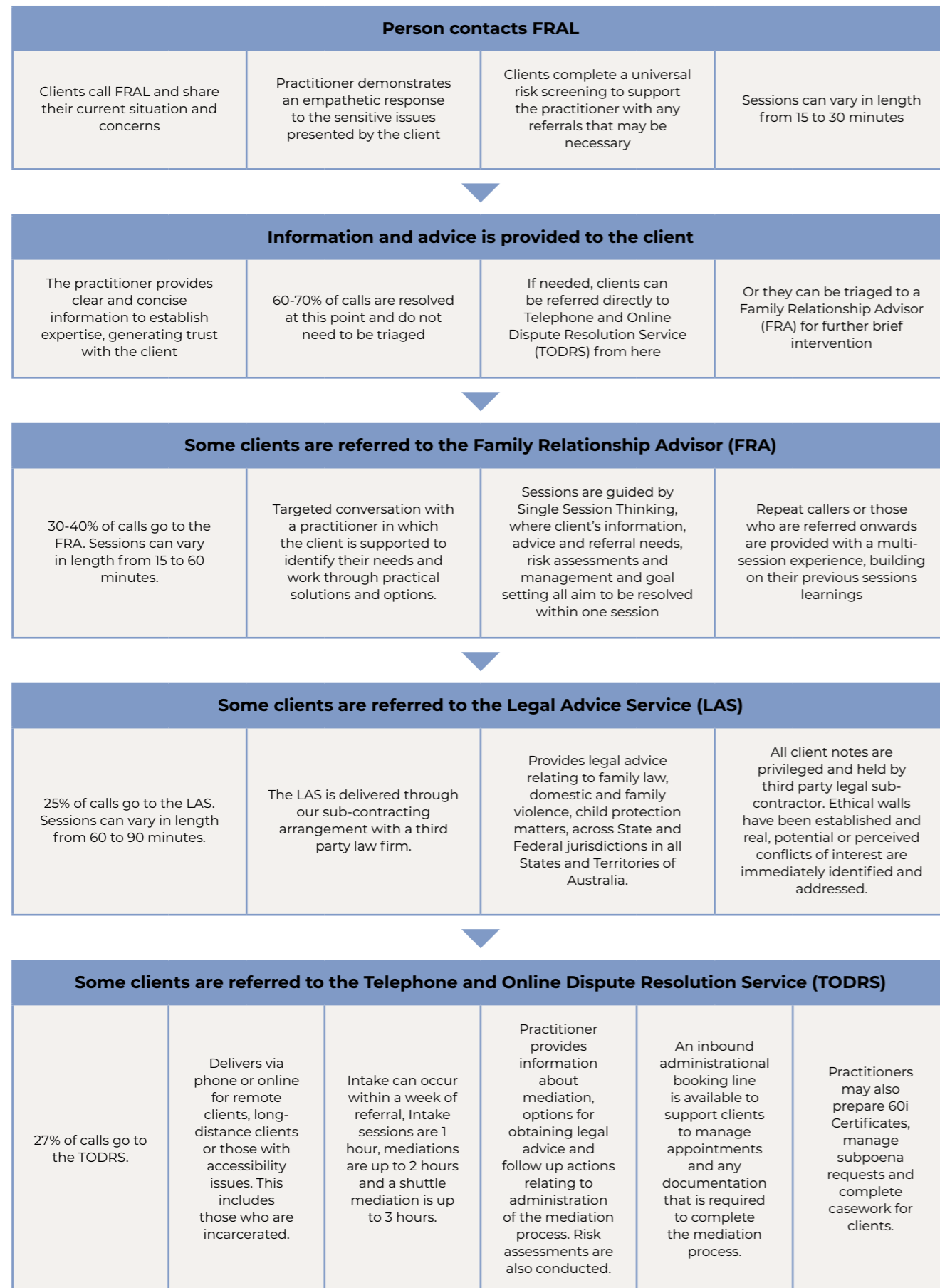
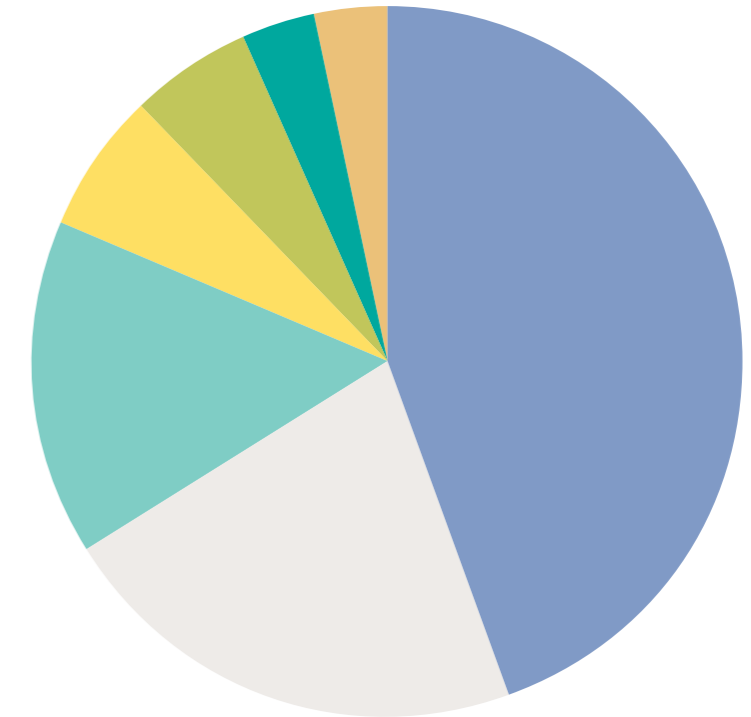
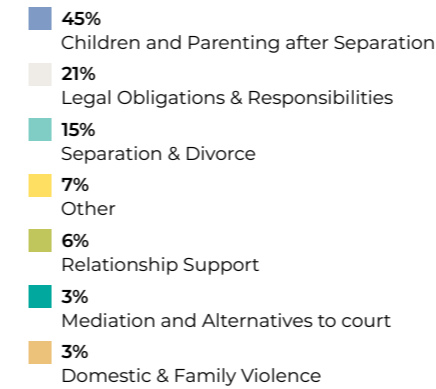


Table 3: Initial presenting needs of families who contact FRAL

When clients call FRAL they share the reason for their call. Table 3 summarises these initial presenting issues, with children, parenting and separation matters the most common reason for calling FRAL. During FRAL calls risk screening processes can often identify a range of co-occurring issues (see Table 5).



Outcomes

Single-session clients experience changes to family functioning

Clients who access FRAL and receive information, advice and referrals experience improvements to their situation just by the process of help-seeking. In recent evaluations of client outcomes, clients reported that FRAL help-seeking led to changes to family functioning and relationship quality.

Over 70% of clients agree that FRAL assisted them to know more about supporting their child, feel more confident in their parenting and keep themselves and their families safe.

8 in 10 would recommend this service to a friend or colleague

A key benefit of FRAL is its ability to connect families to appropriate referrals across Australia that will continue to meet the needs of the clients at their local level.

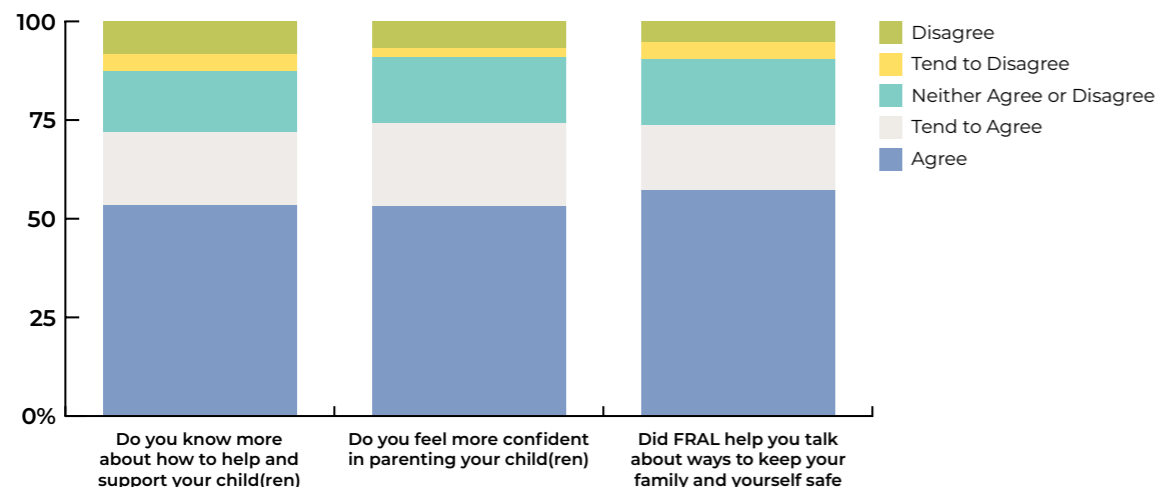
64%
of clients reported that they had been offered a referral during their call.

85%
of clients also reported that they contacted the service they were referred to.

Improvements to family functioning as a result of First Point of Contact

Single session thinking produces fast results. Analysis shows that families report changes to functioning as a result of a single phone call to FRAL.

Table 4: Self-assessment of improvements to family functioning after initial phone-call



78%
of clients agreed they were satisfied with the service they received

82%
of clients stated that the service listened to them and understood their needs

73%
agreed that they are better able to deal with the issues that they sought help with

"I contacted your facilities to find out some information as I have come to a bit of a situation in a family matter. I was on hold for a bit, but IT WAS ALL WORTH IT. I spoke to [Practitioner name] who helped me understand and allowed me to feel like I was making the correct behaviours and future moves towards resolving a family matter. I am sincerely grateful for her help and any continuation of any help from these facilities. The discussion that I had with [Practitioner name] was better than expected and I am truly grateful for her assistance and advice on the matters discussed."

Creating a trusting environment where families feel safe to disclose and risks can be managed

During the initial phone call, a universal safety screening is conducted to identify any risks that may be present. Any indication of harm triggers the practitioner to conduct a warm referral to the Family Relationship Advisor.

The process for identifying risks is:

1. Screening for risk of harm
2. Where there are indicators of risk of harm identified, an assessment for risk of harm takes place
3. Analysing risk of harm for severity and immediacy
4. Managing and mitigating risk of harm (including engaging a client in safety planning, and/or actions to report on a risk of harm; this might also be where we need to call emergency services)
5. Monitoring and reviewing risk of harm at any later contacts/subsequent sessions or follow-ups with the client

The key risks screened for include Child Maltreatment (child abuse and neglect), Domestic and Family Violence (DFV), Addictions (Gambling, Drugs, Alcohol), and psychological distress. Practitioner's must skilfully balance responding to a client's concerns with managing risks to the client and their family. A client's willingness and

engagement in risk assessment and safety planning discussions is key to effective client risk management and therefore practitioners work to build a trusting working relationship within the session so that clients feel comfortable to disclose concerns and worries they have about safety.

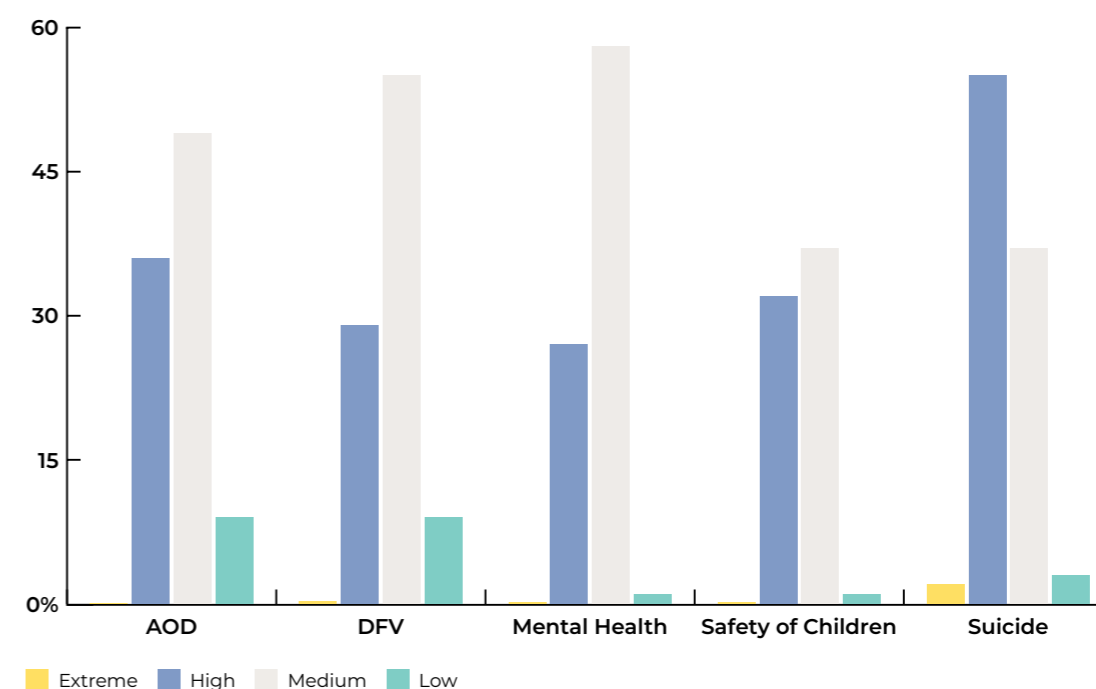
20%
of clients have indicators that suggest a risk of harm

12%
of callers have a risk in domestic and family violence

11%
of callers suggest a risk in the safety of a child

Mental health, Alcohol and other drugs (AOD) and Suicide risk of harm occurs in 2-7% of calls. Where clients are assessed for safety concerns, FRAL practitioners also analyse the severity and immediacy of the harm.

Table 5: Severity of risk among families contacting FRAL



As can be seen in Table 5, high risk of harm is evident in 27-36% of these callers, with extreme risk of harm, often requiring an immediate emergency response, occurring in 0.1-2% of calls. In half of these cases, the client answered 'no' to initial safety screening questions. The skills of the staff illustrate an ability to adeptly

identify risk factors for harm even when a client does not initially disclose concerns themselves.

Creating a trusting and safe therapeutic environment over the phone is key to providing a service that keeps children, families and communities safe.

Services are tailored and appropriate to meet the family where they are



8%
CaLD Clients

Tailoring supports and engaging in partnerships to produce the best outcomes for CaLD families

Research has identified that people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD¹) backgrounds used FDR services less often than other people in the community.² Other data highlighted that culturally diverse families were proportionally over-represented in litigated disputes concerning children but were under-represented as clients of family mediation.³ This data was reflected in demographic information for the Perth Family Relationship Centre (FRC), which initially had low rates of engagement with clients from CaLD backgrounds proportional to the overall population.

The service has implemented a range of measures to address this disparity and ensure that practitioners have the necessary information to effectively support and refer clients relative to their specific cultural, linguistic or faith needs. One method by which this has been achieved has been to ask all Perth FRC clients to complete a Detection Of Overall Risk Screen (DOORS⁴) Form as part of intake and assessment processes. This form asks “Is there anything about your culture or religion that is important for us to understand in order to help you?”. This gives clients an opportunity to share information in a safe and non-judgmental way, which is then acted upon by practitioners.

As operator of the Perth FRC, Relationships Australia Western Australia (RAWA) also initiated a partnership with Multicultural Services Centre of Western Australia (MSCWA), in order to increase engagement with people from CaLD backgrounds at Perth FRC. MSCWA has been supporting

people in Western Australia from CaLD backgrounds for over four decades and aims to address the unmet needs of migrants and refugees in WA.

Through this partnership, three MSCWA staff from CaLD backgrounds are subcontracted to work at Perth FRC. These staff are qualified Family Dispute Resolution Practitioners, are bilingual or multilingual, and have extensive experience in working with individuals and families from a culturally sensitive and responsive perspective.

These staff support cases where it is important to understand family dynamics and family structures within specific cultural contexts. They also provide a range of other services at Perth FRC, including culturally appropriate FDR, training for FRC staff on cross-cultural matters, community development activities, and sharing any relevant cultural expertise.

When Perth FRC was established, RAWA recognised that concepts relating to mediation and FDR might not be fully understood across CaLD communities. The partnership between RAWA and MSCWA has enabled direct engagement to provide education on services available for families following a separation and how family law and child safety could be maintained while cultural identity was also supported.

MCSWA promotes the partnership with Perth FRC through audio-recorded information on their website in twenty community languages. This information includes an overview of Perth FRC and mediation, as well as location, contact details, services, and costs.

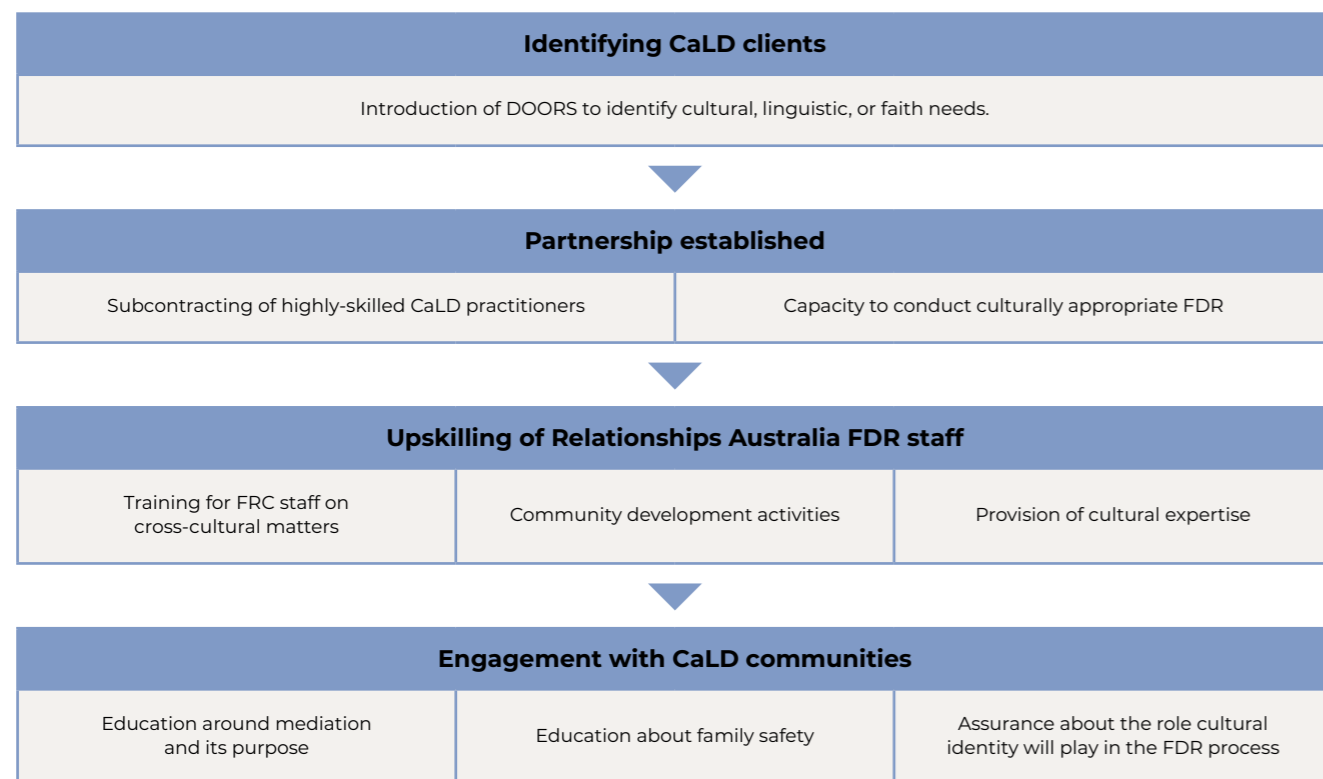
¹ People from CaLD backgrounds refers to people who were born in a country other than Australia and who speak a main language at home other than English.

² Armstrong, S. (2013). Good practices with culturally diverse families in family dispute resolution. Australian Institute of Family Studies.

³ Armstrong, S. (2010). Culturally responsive family dispute resolution in family relationship centres. Australian Institute of Family Studies.

⁴ McIntosh & Ralfs, 2012

Modifying the FDR process and creating partnerships to engage with CaLD clients:



Impact Story

Clients have been married for 10 years and are both from Spain, they have two children aged between 5 and 10 years of age. They attended FDR for Parenting & Property matters. They undertook mediation with a CaLD FDRP (MSCWA) from a similar cultural background. The FDRP also spoke with clients in Spanish at points in the session to assist with parts of the conversation. The FDRP reported

that using their first language assisted the clients to open up more in the session.

Clients attended four joint sessions and worked together to create three parenting plans that reflected a progression in care arrangements for the children over time. Then the clients completed one session of FDR for Property and were able to create a Draft Table of Assets and Liabilities to assist them in obtaining legal advice.

Outcomes

The introduction of tailored supports has improved the Perth FRC's ability to respond to CaLD client groups. Implementing measures to assist in the identification of clients' cultural, linguistic, or faith needs, together with the

partnership with MSCWA has enabled the FRC to achieve several key outcomes:

1. Increased likelihood of people from CaLD backgrounds engaging with the service
2. More positive change for families
3. Greater satisfaction with services

Increased likelihood of people from CaLD backgrounds engaging with the service

Research has indicated that people from CaLD communities are willing to use mainstream family mediation if they feel confident that service providers are culturally competent and if their communities are educated about mediation processes.⁵ The partnership between Relationships Australia WA and the Multicultural Services Centre of WA works effectively to meet both of

these criteria and this is reflected in the positive feedback from clients with CaLD backgrounds who have engaged with Perth FRC.

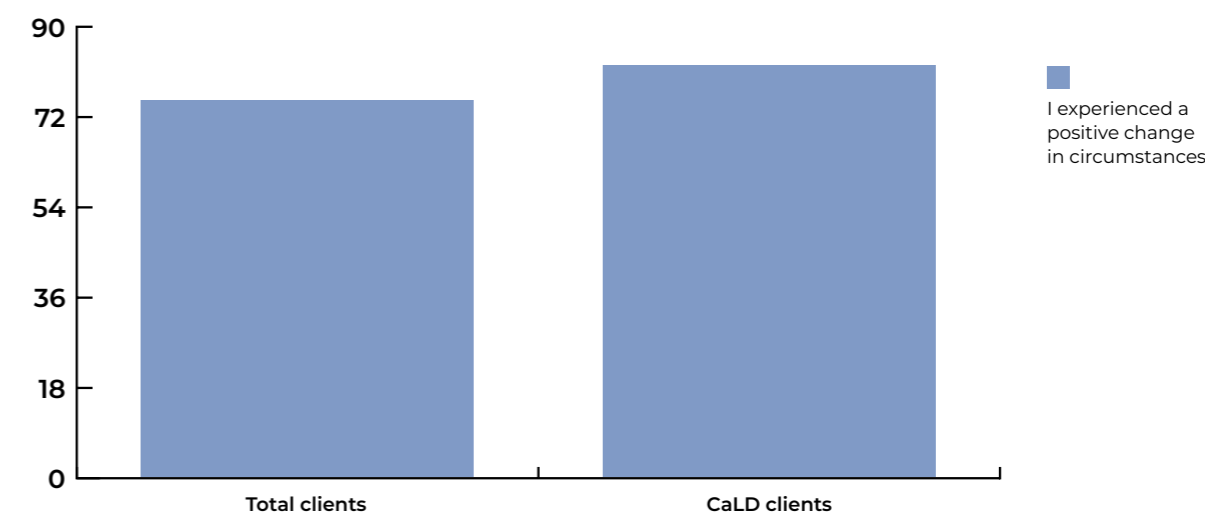
Since the implementation of this program, the proportion of clients from CaLD backgrounds has significantly increased, **from 2.4% in 2018-2019 to 8% of total clients in 2023-2024.**

More positive change for families

After engagement with Perth FRC support, clients from CaLD backgrounds recorded higher overall positive changes

in circumstances compared to total Perth FRC clients (75.3% of total clients, 81.5% of CaLD clients).

Table 6: CaLD families experience increased positive change



Greater satisfaction with services

A small, but statistically significant improvement in levels of satisfaction was seen in CaLD clients (97.8% of total clients were very satisfied compared to 98.2% of CaLD clients). This is further evidenced by positive feedback from CaLD clients, such as:

"The appointment provided me with lots of new information to help me move forward in the mediation process. Thank you for listening."

"This was a very useful session, practitioner was knowledgeable – thank you."

"Very helpful and informative. Everything was explained clearly."

"It was great to have the issues spoken about and a plan to look forward to."

"Mediator was so understanding, empathetic and knowledgeable. Really appreciated the session."

"FDRP did really well. I did not expect this meeting to be so good. Thank you."

This ultimately leads more CaLD clients to engage FDR services, improving parenting, family functioning and ensuring safety, leading to greater wellbeing for all.

⁵ Centre for International Economics. (2023). Family and Relationship Services Economic Evaluation – Final Report. Centre for International Economics.

Services are tailored and appropriate to meet the family where they are



Improving family functioning and improvements to wellbeing via remote family dispute resolution

Access Family Dispute Resolution provides flexible support, online or over the phone, to help manage relationship breakdowns and manage disputes for parenting and property arrangements. Delivered by Relationships Australia New South Wales and funded by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, this service provides valuable assistance when face-to-face family mediation services at a Family Relationship Centre aren't accessible, due to location or other circumstances. They provide a range of services, including establishing child-focused written parenting agreements and negotiating mutually acceptable agreements around property, including assets and debts.

Many services went remote during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Research into remote FDR found that it is important for enhanced accessibility, enhanced physical safety and greater convenience for clients (Heard, Bickerdike & Opoku, 2022). This study, conducted by Relationships Australia Victoria during COVID-19 restrictions found that providing FDR remotely can also provide some emotional protection for clients, for example:

One Family Dispute Resolution Practitioner (FDRP) said it was "less daunting, less confronting for some people, less nerve wracking"

Another said: "I think that people were more relaxed in their own home, their own environment."

Not having to see their former partner in-person reduced anxiety and meant that some clients felt more confident in negotiating agreements.

Ultimately, the study found that remote FDR can have important advantages for convenience, increased safety and reduced conflict potential. Most importantly, it supports remote clients to access a service they would otherwise struggle to attend.

Some data suggests that without the face-to-face element, clients may miss out on an opportunity to improve family functioning, as positive emotions could also be diluted. However, the research found that this is most likely where FDR takes place between more amicable separating partners:

"Being in the same room I think facilitated simple moments that at least for me, brought us a little bit closer together... It acted as a barrier, the virtual format, to sort of more natural responses"

While noting that different formats will be considered preferable depending on the family's circumstances, the study found that the availability of remote FDR is critical.

Access Family Dispute Resolution has been particularly useful for clients in New South Wales, with the largest population in Australia spread throughout the state. Additionally, clients who may not have been deemed appropriate for FDR due to safety concerns or accessibility issues have found use in the service. Impact data shows that despite the remoteness of the service, client satisfaction is high, and clients were able to improve their relationship functioning.

Outcomes

Clients feel understood and better able to cope with their challenges

Despite the program supporting clients in elevated conflict, the service reports high levels of satisfaction. This is supported by skilled practitioners who enable parties to be heard and supported through the process.

“Feeling more confident in what I can ask for/knowing what’s reasonable and what’s not.”

“I am so thankful for this service! I felt ‘heard’ and that my situation was understood by people with a high level of experience and skills to deal with it. At all times, the mediators dealt with me both kindly and efficiently. The care I received and the financial burden this relieved was a great blessing. Thank you again, I don’t know what I would have done if this service had not picked-up our case.”

Improvements to family functioning despite remote service provision

Families accessing mediation remotely are found to experience many of the same benefits as those who access the service in person. Although the service is remotely

delivered, most feel that the challenges in their relationship have reduced and that the service increased their ability to deal with the challenges in their relationship.

Changes to wellbeing and satisfaction with relationships

The personal wellbeing index (PWI) is administered before and after clients attend services. Each question corresponds to a different area that gives insight into a person’s quality of life, including standard of living, health, achieving in life, relationships, safety, community-connectedness, and future security. After attending remote mediation, clients saw an improvement to their wellbeing, especially in relation to their satisfaction with their personal relationships.

“Exceptional service by [practitioner] and her team. I felt so supported throughout such a difficult process. The advice provided will carry through post separation. I’m so grateful to you both for your help, you made the process so much easier than it could of been. I will be recommending to anyone put in the same situation as myself.”

In 2023-24, Relationships Australia provided over

2,300

online dispute resolution sessions across the country.

Impact Story

When Fiona* and Steve* reached out to us for help, they had been separated for 12 months and were struggling to navigate shared parenting of their two children.

Steve had moved to Sydney with his new partner, while Fiona remained in the family home in regional New South Wales. Steve wanted regular fortnightly visits, but Fiona worried about the disruption to the children’s routines, as well as travel and accommodation costs. They needed professional guidance to find a solution that prioritised their children’s wellbeing.

With distance complicating in-person mediation, they used our Access Family Mediation Service, delivered entirely online. This service was critical in enabling them to address their differences without further strain.

Before joint sessions, they each attended individual pre-mediation assessments. These were essential in giving Fiona and Steve a safe space to express their concerns. Through mediation, they reached a carefully balanced agreement: Steve would begin with day trips, transitioning to overnight stays after three months if the children were adjusting well. The kids would also visit Sydney once a month and have weekly video calls with their dad. They also agreed to return to mediation if any issues arose.

By the end, both Fiona and Steve were thankful for the opportunity to resolve these challenges from the comfort of their own homes, appreciating the regular breaks that allowed them to process their emotions. The mediation gave them a practical, child-focused plan that ensured their children’s best interests came first.

*Names, details, images have been changed



Children are centred through the separation process

Children's Contact Services: a key referral pathway into and out of the family law system, disrupting intergenerational cycles of poor parenting

Children's Contact Services (CCS) occupy a unique and important position within the FRSP and Australia's family law system more broadly. Funded by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, they are designed to provide a safe, supervised environment for children to spend time with the parent they do not live with, or to facilitate the transfer of children from one parent to another, in circumstances where parents are not able to manage their own parenting time arrangements.

CCS seek to emphasise the importance of children's ongoing relationships with their parents and other significant people in their lives (Children's Contact Services Guiding Principles Framework for Good Practice, 2018 p.3). For this reason, CCS are considered integral to realising the children's right to participation (Article 12 Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989) while at the same time ensuring that their safety and best interests are protected above all.

Relationships Australia operates CCS across the country, including the Riverina CCS, which is operated by Relationships

Australia Canberra & Region. Through this service they have reconnected families in the region in a safe and supported way for nearly 20 years. For many families the Riverina CCS is the only means for children to have a relationship with both parents and other significant family members. A high proportion of presenting cases involve an Apprehended Domestic Violence Order between the parents, with the Riverina CCS being one of the few options for those affected to have and maintain contact with their children in a safe and supported manner. The CCS can also be used to facilitate change overs between parents when necessary.

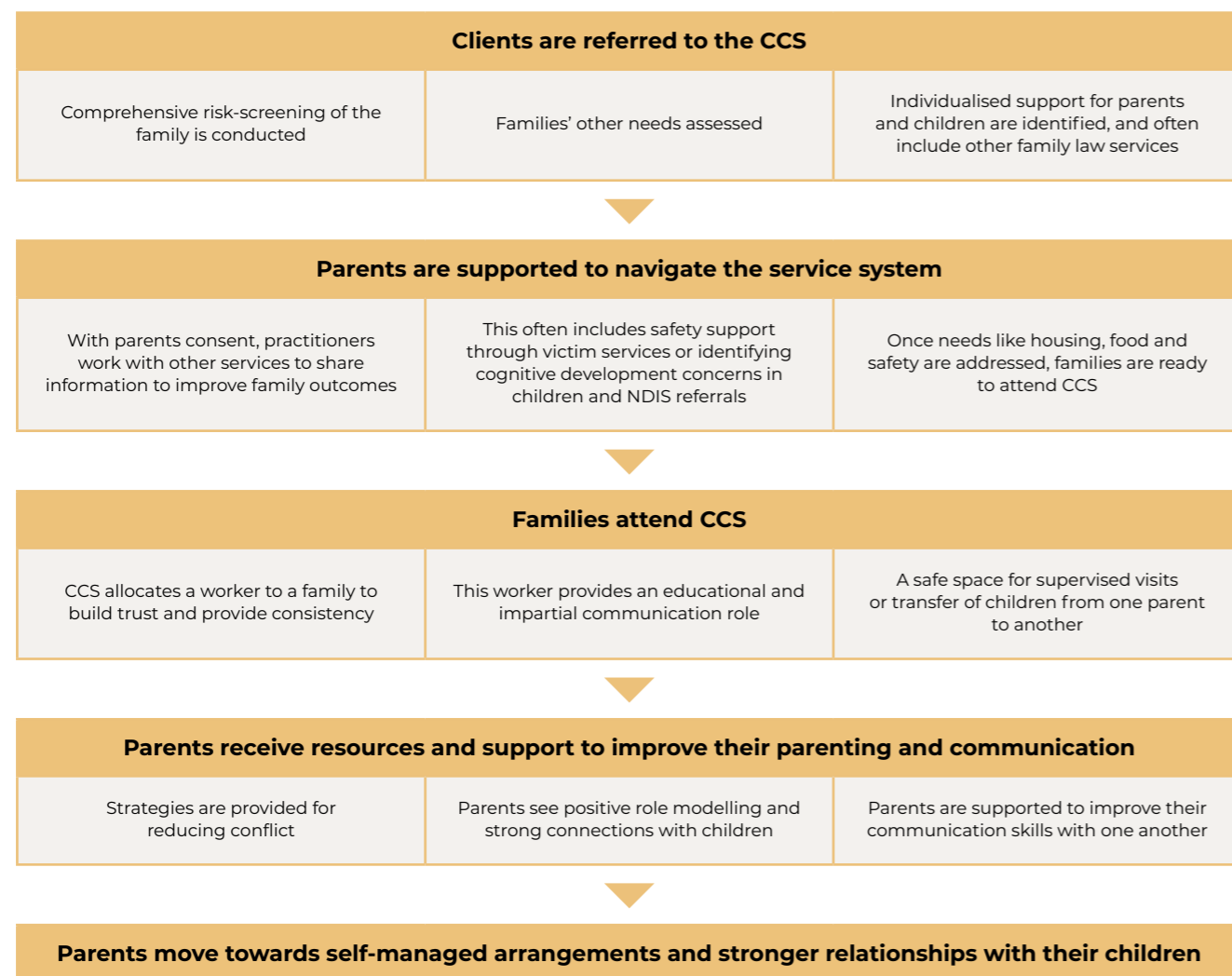
Many parents who use the Riverina CCS experience high levels of conflict and multiple and complex issues such as family violence, mental health problems, homelessness and substance abuse. The CCS adopts an integrated and collaborative service model that works closely with other services, including family dispute mediation, counselling, alcohol and drug services, mental health and parenting services, Independent Children's Lawyers and the Court system.

In 2023-24, Children's Contact Services provided by Relationships Australia across the country supported over

3,500
clients

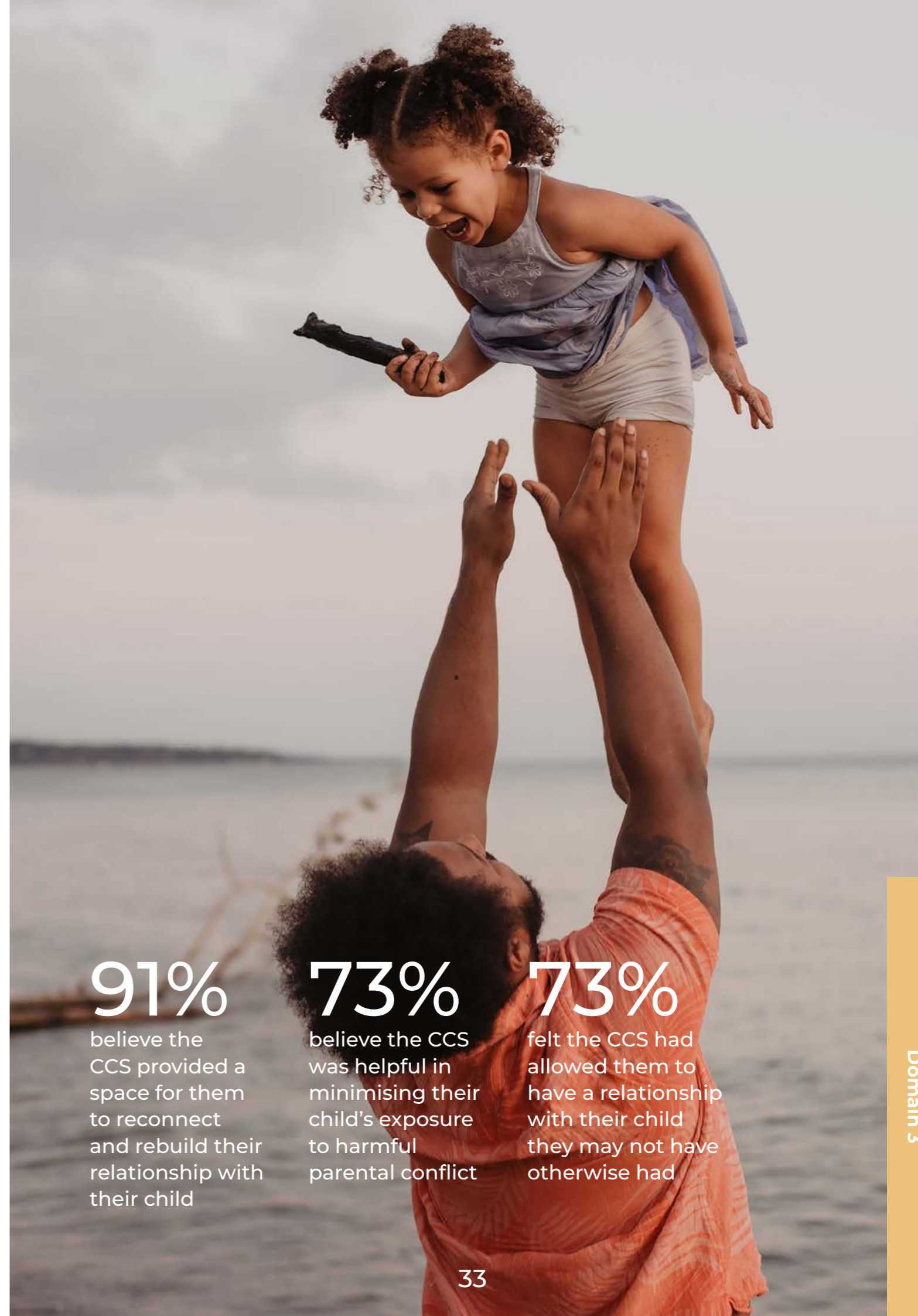
20,000
sessions

How CCS providers use referrals, education and role modelling to support better parenting:



The majority of families use the service after being referred or mandated by Court, with many parents initially reluctant to participate. Some parents engaging with the CCS have limited positive parenting experiences and a subsequent lack of parenting skills. They often come from dysfunctional family environments themselves. The CCS plays a crucial role in teaching parents how to be a parent, by building connections and most importantly engaging with their child in an age appropriate and safe way.

The goal of the CCS is to lead to better outcomes for children and their parents. The ultimate aim is to improve co-parent communication and parenting skills. As such, CCS work to break the intergenerational cycle of poor parenting through role modelling, parenting education and referrals.



91%
believe the CCS provided a space for them to reconnect and rebuild their relationship with their child

73%
believe the CCS was helpful in minimising their child's exposure to harmful parental conflict

73%
felt the CCS had allowed them to have a relationship with their child they may not have otherwise had

Impact Story

Barry* was referred to the Riverina CCS by the Court to establish a relationship with his daughter Charlotte* (2 years). A no contact AVO was in place for Barry's ex-partner, Karen, that included Charlotte, and Barry had been advised the CCS was the only option if he wanted to maintain a relationship with Charlotte. Barry had not been present in Charlotte's life to this point and had little knowledge or understanding about parenting. He had not spent much time in the company of small children and had poor role modelling from his own upbringing. Karen was initially very reluctant to engage with the CCS, she had concerns about Charlotte spending any time in Barry's company. The CCS invited Karen and Charlotte to visit and spend time in the centre and outlined the process, including staggered arrival and departure times to ensure no cross over with Barry. This was

an opportunity to work with both Karen and Charlotte to address their concerns and make sure they felt safe and supported. Supervised contact sessions progressed in duration as the dedicated CCS worker educated Barry in developing parenting skills and how to connect through age-appropriate play with Charlotte. Regular communication with both parents built trust in the CCS process and created a communication dialogue about Charlotte. Through engagement with the CSS Barry was able to demonstrate to Karen and the Court that he had developed parenting skills and built a connection with Charlotte, ultimately enabling the family to progress to changeovers for short un-supervised visits. The family continues to work towards self-managing their parenting. *names changed

Outcomes



Space and support help parents build positive relationships with their children

Once the needs of a client are addressed and they are given time to reflect on their own childhood and incorporate new parenting skills into their lives, parents engaging with their children through supervised visits often find their relationships to their children improve dramatically.

Co-parent sees improvements to child-parent relationship

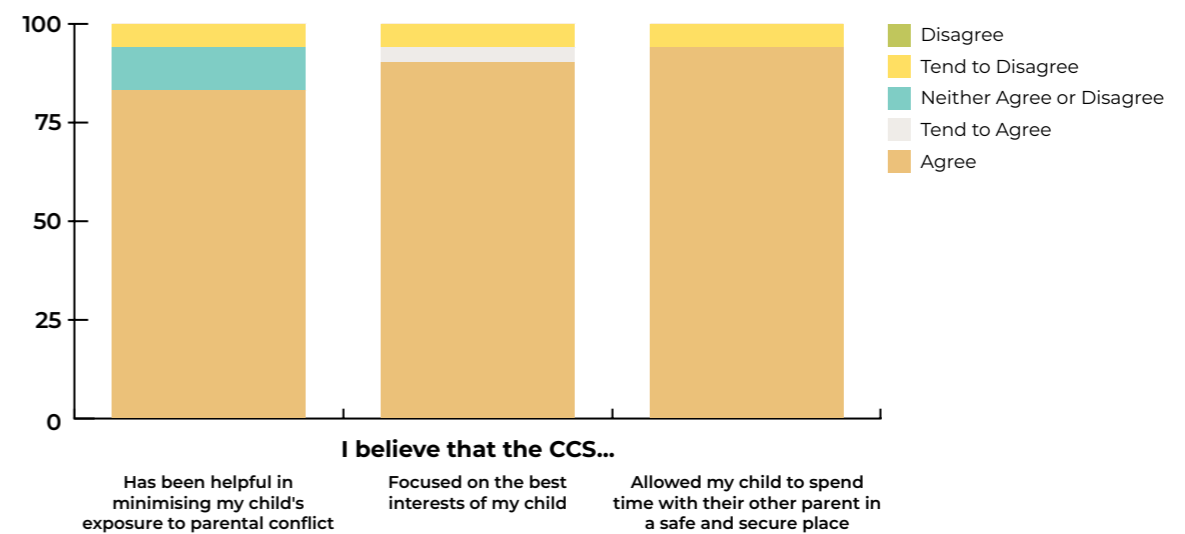
Most families attending the CCS have experienced family violence. The parent who the child lives with is often trepidatious about attending the service, as they do not want to expose their children to more systems. However, most find the experience surprisingly rewarding. *I avoided the contact centre for nearly 2 years due to not wanting to expose my children to social workers and the experience of "a contact centre & supervised access". I saw it as this monster that I didn't want my children to be exposed to, to have it in their memories and psyche. What I have found is it is a safe and warm place of solace for the kids and I. I am spoken to and told in general*

"kids had fun". Staff communicate with me! :) On our first visit the workers knew the kids medical history and listed off everything I'd told another worker. It was amazing to have the communication. It is the complete opposite of what I thought it would be. It has been a saving grace for us. (There's no build up of tension of what's going to happen). Looking back, trying to navigate what was happening before was what I'd never want my children to see or be exposed to. If I had my time again I'd do the child contact centre much earlier. THANK YOU!!" (feedback from a client at Relationships Australia)

Positive relationships with children motivates a functional co-parenting relationship

Across our services, the key motivating factor for parents to improve their co-parenting relationship is to preserve the relationship they have with their children. Centring the child's experience supports parents to reframe their thinking, even in highly acrimonious or previously violent relationships. The supervised parent improves their relationship to the child and the non-supervised parent often reports they are surprised by the experience and the positive outcomes for the child because of safe and supervised contact.

Table 9: Thoughts on the CCS from the parent with whom the child lives



Ultimately, these new relationships support the parents to move towards self-managed contact, engaging new parenting and conflict reduction strategies and always prioritising the safety and wellbeing of the child.

Children are centred through the separation process



Encouraging positive co-parenting after separation through wrap-around support

Parenting can be challenging after separating, especially when there is disagreement and conflict between parents. Relationships Australia delivers a range of post-separation support programs, including the Parenting Orders Program (POP) funded by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, to support parents to identify and develop useful strategies and communicate more effectively with each other and to ensure the best interest of children are prioritised.

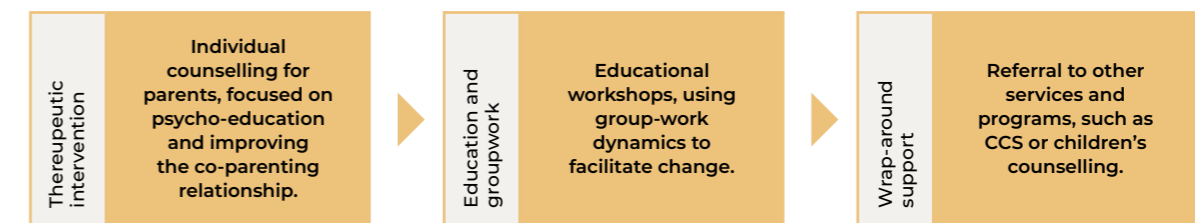
Relationships Australia Tasmania delivers the Parenting Separately Program under its POP funding. Through six individual

sessions and a workshop series, parents work through a number of focus areas in a highly supportive and safe environment. Parents are often referred by the Court, legal practitioners and other services. This program refocuses parents on children, so they can resolve conflict and communicate better.

The POP assists parents to:

- Identify & develop useful strategies to deal with challenges relating to co-parenting
- Decrease the impact parental conflict has on children
- Improve communication to best support children's needs

The POP includes



Ten key takeaways from POP

Our clients tell us that the POP assists them in the following ways:

- 1.** Increased self-awareness, self-reflection, and understanding of oneself
- 2.** Improved communication skills, such as active listening and responding instead of reacting
- 3.** Gained knowledge about healthy relationships, self-worth, and identifying abusive or coercive behaviour
- 4.** Understanding the impact of negative thoughts and trauma on well-being and self-worth
- 5.** Benefits of sharing experiences, gaining new skills, and accessing resources and support
- 6.** Increased confidence and a sense of community
- 7.** Strategies for positive communication, managing emotions, and understanding different parenting styles
- 8.** Focus on building resilience in children and co-parenting harmoniously
- 9.** Tips for re-partnering, blending families, and prioritising children's well-being
- 10.** Appreciation for the tools, strategies, and insights gained from the workshops

Outcomes

Parents explore impacts of separation and develop useful strategies to deal with challenges relating to co-parenting

Akaliza* participated in POP program and provided the following feedback upon completion:

- I realised I am not alone in my separation journey
- The program helped me understand my experiences were normal
- I now hold no embarrassment about the relationship breakdown (being the first in my family to divorce)

- The program helped me understand that Australian culture and law provides me with rights within the marriage, which has reduced my fears.

*name changed

Other clients found that the therapeutic service supported them to address concerns and develop co-parenting strategies that would not be possible in the larger group.

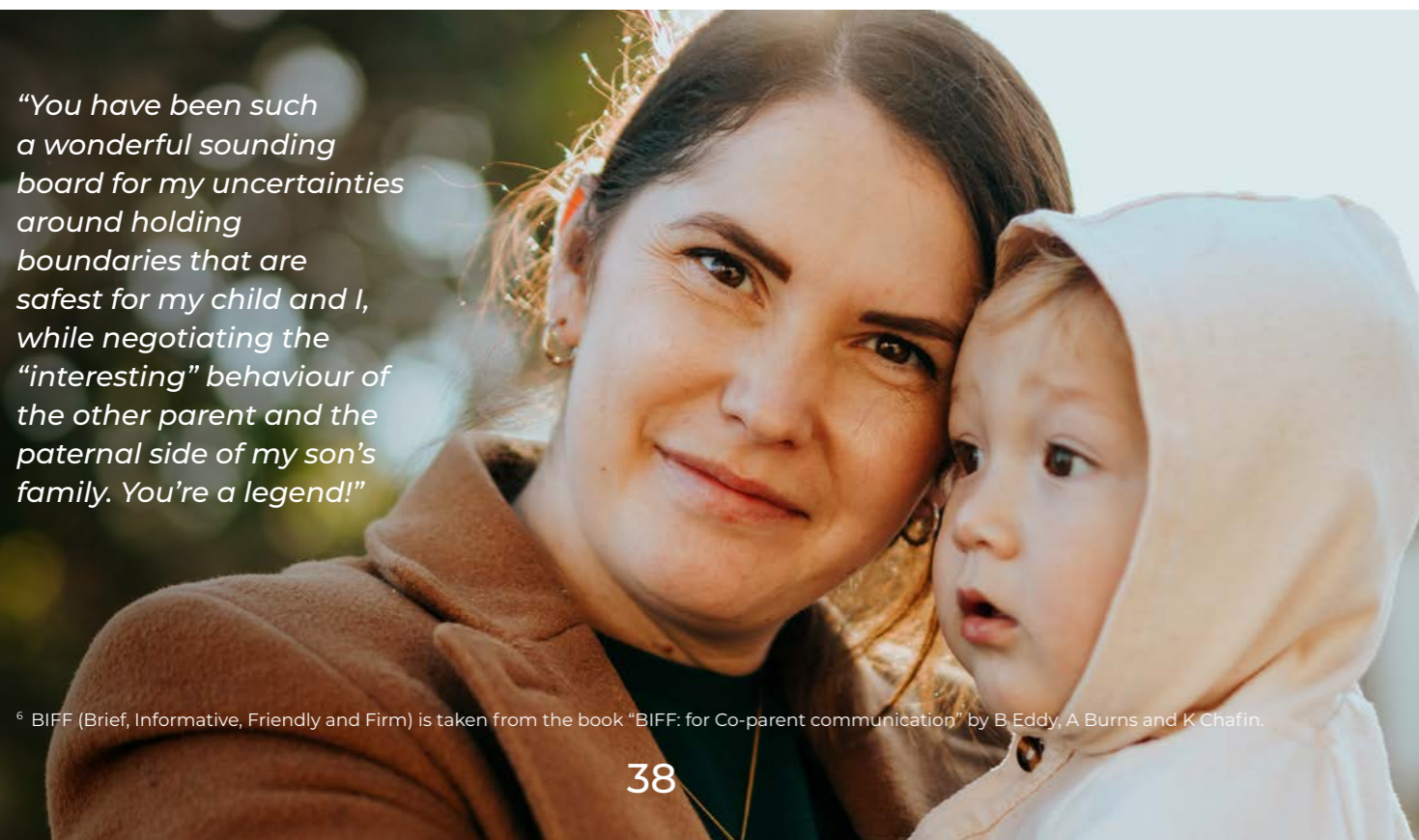
Parents reduce feelings of shame and loneliness, feeling supported and connected to their group

Client feedback demonstrates that the group dynamic is an important aspect of the program, which supports clients to implement lessons and track progress, while providing each other with support and empathy.

“Since finishing up with the program our group of ladies have created a small online messenger group to stay in touch and provide support for each other in moving forward with our communication

techniques and have had lots of positive and helpful conversations around “BIFF-ing”⁶ and not letting the “turkeys get us down” because they are unable to control the conversation anymore. It’s been such a lovely experience to know we have the support of people in similar situations.”

“You have been such a wonderful sounding board for my uncertainties around holding boundaries that are safest for my child and I, while negotiating the “interesting” behaviour of the other parent and the paternal side of my son’s family. You’re a legend!”



⁶ BIFF (Brief, Informative, Friendly and Firm) is taken from the book “BIFF: for Co-parent communication” by B.Eddy, A Burns and K.Chafin.

Impact story

A family has engaged with POP for support relating to dispute resolution, conflict and disagreement, and experiences of family violence over many years. The family includes separated parents Adam* (47) and Mary* (43), their son Max* (15) and daughter Fran* (11).

At the time of parental separation there were a range of communication difficulties,

unresolved disputes and child exposure to inappropriate adult conversations and themes. The disagreements relating to children’s matters escalated post-separation and new relationships formed, further impacting the children. Compounding the impact was Max’s diagnosis of ASD and his father’s decision to start a new relationship with the mother of his best friend.

*names changed

Wrap-around services

Family Dispute Resolution commences for Adam and Mary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both parties had an opportunity to negotiate working toward an agreement relating to children’s matters • Barriers to forming agreement included communication difficulties and Adam’s inability to acknowledge the potential impacts of his new relationship on the children • While FDR ceased in August 2023 with agreements not being followed or adequately reached, additional services were brought in to further support their general progress and wellbeing
Parenting Separately accessed by Mary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mary benefited from engaging in POP to work on her understanding of how conflict and communication challenges may impact the children and reflecting on the role of parents • Mary worked on the goal of improving her communication through learning new skills and strategies
Child Inclusive Practice was introduced to the FDR process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Max and Fran had an opportunity to be safely supported and involved in the process of dispute resolution to assist in getting their needs met • The input of both children shifted the parents agreements in FDR
Mary continued to access support through the Family Law Counselling (FLC) service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mary was highly engaged and help-seeking in her approach to managing the family issues, and was referred from POP to FLC • Mary continued to work on overcoming her grief and loss, developing an improved focus on the best interests of the children and establishing suitable goals for herself and the family for the longer term
Both children were referred into the Children’s Specialised Family Violence Service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Max and Fran engaged in further trauma-informed support to assist them with the adjustment to change and to learn therapeutic strategies to assist with their mental health and general wellbeing

The importance of holistic services

All family members had an opportunity to be heard, receive support, and resolve their differences, engaging in several services.

Adam – engaged in FDR and participated in facilitated discussions to establish an agreement relating the children’s matters, was provided education relating to the potential impacts on his children, and was afforded an opportunity to be heard and to raise plans to move in with a new partner

Mary – engaged in FDR, POP and FLC, assisting in her attempts to resolve disputes, minimise unhelpful communications that assist her children to access further supports, and manage the grief and loss associated with the family breakdown

Max and Fran – participated through child inclusive mediation process and the Children’s Specialised Family Violence service (ACORN), assisting in improvement to their mental health and general wellbeing.

Children are centred through the separation process



Listening to the voice of the child to help guide challenging relocation disputes

Many separated families engage with Family Dispute Resolution to navigate relocation issues. The Northern Territory has a very transient community, with a high cost of living and for many, family support is located “down south” or interstate. These are difficult cases for parents to negotiate on their own, even in previously amicable and collaborative co-parenting relationships. The stakes are high, and emotions are often heightened.

In cases such as these, it can be helpful to engage a Child Consultant to assist the parents to consider the proposed move from the child’s perspective. Child Consultants are practitioners who have undergone specialised training enabling them to conduct an age-appropriate discussion with children about their experiences of the dispute. Children are

not asked to solve problems or provide their opinion on the dispute. Instead, Child Consultants discuss their feelings and experiences and then communicate these findings with parents, enabling them to take their child’s views into consideration. Research shows that child inclusive practices such as these improve relationships across the family, leading to greater psychological wellbeing for the children. Additionally, agreements are more durable and new litigation is less likely when child inclusive practices take place (McIntosh et. al. 2007).

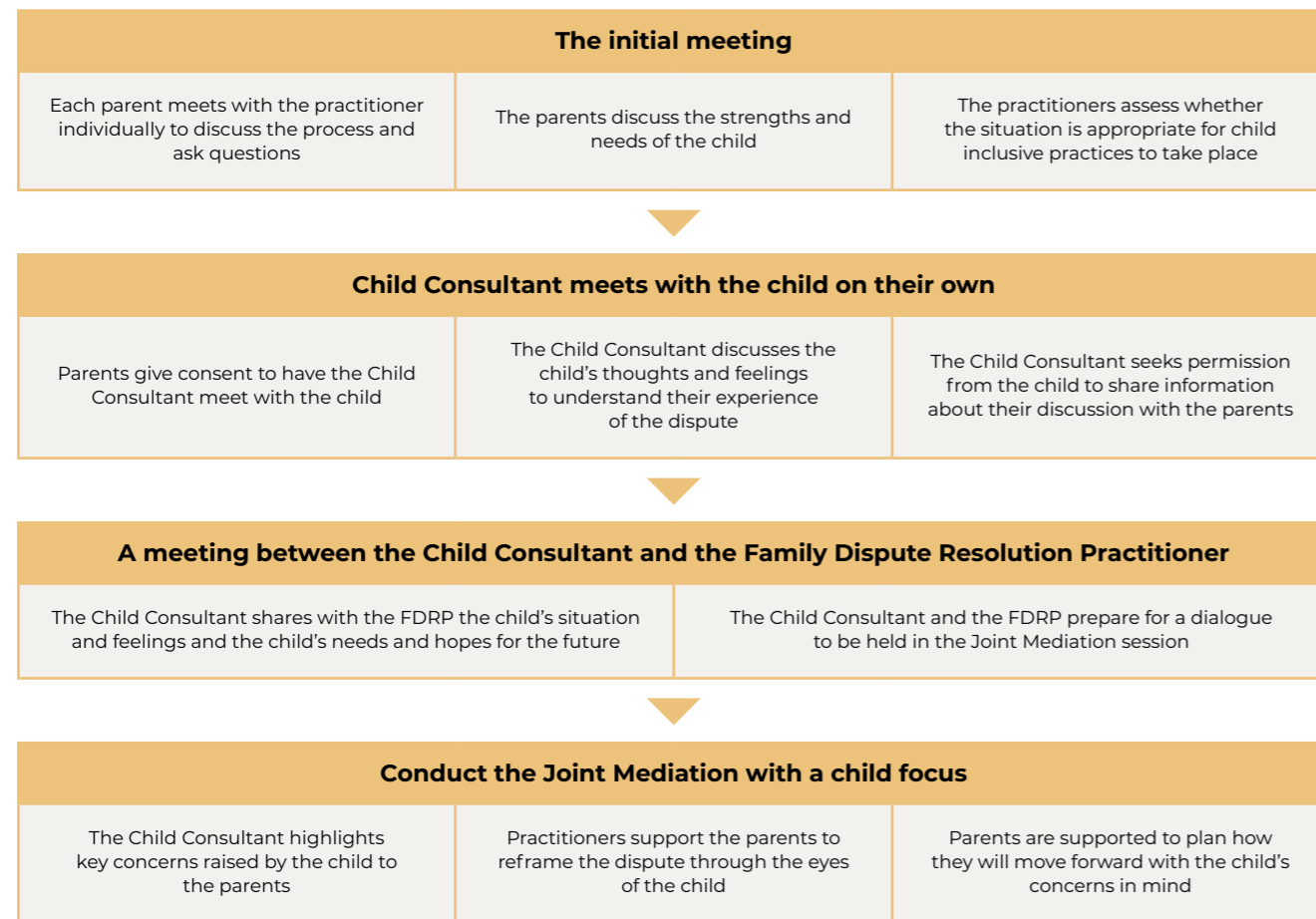
In addition to a range of child-focused services and other funded programs for children and young people, Relationships Australia delivers over

1,200

Child Inclusive Practice sessions in the FRSP across the country.

“Child Consultants are practitioners who have undergone specialised training enabling them to conduct an age-appropriate discussion with children about their experiences of the dispute”

The Child Inclusive Practice Process for FDR:



Impact Story

Parents experiencing a separation and considering a move visited the service. Both parents indicated they were keen to hear what their daughter was thinking and feeling but did not want her to feel responsible for any big decisions. The Child Consultant's role was explained to highlight that it would not ask Dee* whether she wanted to move, but would instead focus on understanding her feelings and experiences of life through the separation. Consent was then given by both parents to participate in the CIP process.

The Child Consultant met with Dee's parents individually, and then Dee. They then met with the Family Dispute Resolution Practitioner to share their findings. In the Joint Mediation, the Child Consultant highlighted the high level of parental attunement and connection from the parents, evidenced by both parents having similar accounts of their child, and

the fact that Dee had stated she generally felt joyful and happy.

The Child Consultant then shared what she had learnt about Dee, including her hobbies and her description of life in each parent's home. She noted the fact that Dee was very in touch with her emotions and body reactions, using phrases like "it's the hormones" or "I'm trying to stop but the tears keep coming". The Child Consultant noted that Dee spent a lot of time talking about her pets in both homes. The Child Consultant clarified that Dee had brought up the topic of relocation herself and the Child Consultant had merely repeated and summarised her statements.

The key points the Child Consultant invited the parents to consider were:

- Pets are very important to Dee. She had made a point of saying Molly* (the family cat at the Father's house) needed to be with her wherever she lived.

- Dee says she is happy with the current week about arrangement.
- Dee stated that when the move is brought up by either parent, "the joy leaves my body".
She became quite upset at the thought of either leaving Molly behind or taking Molly and then her father no longer having Molly at his home. She said, "If I could put a wish out there, it would be for everyone to stay where they are and no one to leave".
- Dee talked about feeling connected to both homes, with there being lots of memories in Mum's house and a pool at Dad's new house.
- Dee said she originally wanted to move but now doesn't want to.
- She wants Dad to take her seriously and understand that she has big feelings about the move.

After listening to the Child Consultant, both parents acknowledged that they hadn't been focusing on how important Molly was to Dee. The mother said it was good for her to hear. The Child Consultant suggested that in moving forward, it would be important for both parents to:

- Agree on how they will talk about the move and take seriously Dee's expressed desire to hear less about it.
- Discuss how they will support Dee to manage any grief associated with a move if it happens.
- Discuss how they would support Dee to maintain close relationships if the move was to occur.

*names changed

Outcomes

The introduction of Child Consultants into the mediation and post-separation work supports parents to reframe their focus during a dispute to ensure that the

best outcomes are achieved for the child, which often results in reduced acrimony as parents work together to support their child.

The key outcomes of Child Inclusive Practice are:

Helping parents to understand how children are feeling and coping in difficult family situations
The parents agreed to speak to Dee together after the Joint Mediation and say: "Thanks for talking to [the Child Consultant]. We've taken on board what you've said. We are going to put the move on hold. Everything will stay the same."
Ensuring children are not left out when a family is making significant decisions
The information from the Child Consultant led the parents to agree to "put the plans to move on hold" until she had finished Year 9
Children feel emotionally safer, more resilient and more confident in their parents' choices
Dee felt listened to and supported by her parents
Parents understand effects of conflict on children
They agreed to be more mindful of Dee's wellbeing and to limit initiating conversations, instead texting one another about the move
Improvements to wellbeing and mental health regardless of desired outcome
Prior to beginning the process, the father's mental health and wellbeing was already improving (DSS score 3). By the end, he was demonstrating adequate ongoing mental health and wellbeing (DSS score 4). Before the process, the mother's mental health and wellbeing was significantly negatively impacted (DSS score 1). By the end of the Joint Mediation session, considerable progress towards improving her mental health and wellbeing was evident (DSS score of 3), despite the fact that she decided to postpone her desired move as a result of the process. Both parents gave feedback that the service listened to them and understood their issues; that they were satisfied with the services received; and they were better able to deal with the issues that they had sought help with.

Glossary

AVO – Apprehended Violence Order

BIFF – Brief, Informative, Friendly, and Firm (communication technique)

CaLD – Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

CCS – Children’s Contact Service

CIP – Child Inclusive Practice

DFV – Domestic and Family Violence

DOORS – Detection of Overall Risk Screen

FDR – Family Dispute Resolution

FDRP – Family Dispute Resolution Practitioner

FPOC – First Point of Contact

FRA – Family Relationship Advisor

FRSP – Family Relationships Services Program

FRC – Family Relationship Centre

FRAL – Family Relationship Advice Line

LAS – Legal Advice Service

MSCWA – Multicultural Services Centre of Western Australia

POP – Parenting Orders Program

PWI – Personal Wellbeing Index

TODRS – Telephone and Online Dispute Resolution Service

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