

# Social Impact Report 2023

Relationships Australia®  
VICTORIA

75  
— YEARS —





## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners of the lands and waterways of Australia.

We support Aboriginal peoples' right to self-determination and culturally safe services. We are committed to encouraging a culturally safe and supportive environment for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who access our services or engage with our organisation.

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

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

Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) acknowledges the funding it receives from the Australian and Victorian Governments.

We also acknowledge our practitioners and all RAV employees for their work each day to create meaningful and lasting change in the lives of individuals, families and communities across Victoria. A special thanks to Kate Matthies-Brown for her assistance with preparing this report.

Finally, we would like to thank our clients for sharing your stories with us.

We use some stock photos in this report and advise that they are for illustrative purposes only. No association between the person/s pictured and the subject matter of the report is intended.

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

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# Welcome



**We are proud to present our Social Impact Report for 2023. Relationships Australia Victoria is committed to understanding and demonstrating impact and ensuring that clients receive the most effective support possible.**

In recent years, we've made significant progress in developing our theory of change and incorporating fit-for-purpose outcome measurement, known to improve clinical decision-making and efficacy.

We are strengthening our approach to evidence-informed practice, creating a culture of learning and using developmental evaluation to inform program design and implementation. This has allowed us to refine our models, improve practice, better understand the needs of clients and communities, respond to emerging evidence, and increase our contribution to the evidence base.

This Social Impact Report complements our Annual Report 2022–23. It showcases the effects of our activities and incorporates the firsthand experience of practitioners – who witness transformational change in people's lives every day – in addition to client voice and research evidence.

In 2023, we broadened the way in which we demonstrate the value and impact of our work by commencing a cost–benefit analysis of our Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) services. Cost–benefit analysis is

a comprehensive and evidence-based method for systematically organising and presenting the economic, social and environmental impacts of different programs. This will allow us to better advocate for and articulate the impact of our programs and inform client decision-making. We look forward to sharing this analysis in the coming months.

We are also increasingly adopting a place-based lens – a promising, collaborative approach for addressing complex social issues. We are continually learning from our experiences in the delivery and evaluation of a range of place-based initiatives to strengthen family relationships. Collaboration can lead to systemic change in a way that no single policy, program or organisation can achieve on its own. We will build on these learnings and apply them to service design and delivery going forward.

Our prevention and early intervention initiatives are continuously informed by emerging evidence in a range of areas. These include the developmental significance of the early years, prevention of gender-based violence, and the promotion of mental health and wellbeing by strengthening

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**Relationships and connection are fundamental to our health and wellbeing. When relationships thrive, families, children and communities flourish.**

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protective factors such as positive family relationships, and social and emotional competencies.

The Australian Government recently released 'Measuring What Matters', the first comprehensive national wellbeing framework. This framework acknowledges the significance of broader measures of wellbeing, envisioning a healthier, more secure, sustainable, cohesive and prosperous Australia.

Relationships and connections are the foundations on which this vision is built. Not only are relationships integral to individual wellbeing, but also to the outcomes and effectiveness of services. They are also essential to influencing systems change. Strong relationships and connections support families and communities to navigate multiple environmental, economic and social challenges.

Our Social Impact Report provides an overview of our approach to evaluation and evidence-informed practice.

**Dr Andrew Bickerdike**  
Chief Executive Officer

**Sandra Opoku**  
Manager Evaluation and Social Impact

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# Understanding our impact

Our services are focused on strengthening families and relationships and improving outcomes across 5 key domains. These domains have been refined over the past few years in consultation with our practice specialists, practitioners and clients.

This Social Impact Report provides a selection of impact stories to demonstrate how we create change across the 5 domains.

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## Domain 1

Mental health and wellbeing

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## Domain 2

Child wellbeing

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## Domain 3

Personal and family safety

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## Domain 4

Family functioning

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## Domain 5

Connection and belonging

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*\* All general statistics in the report relate to 2022–23.*



A social impact report demonstrates the real-world effect of an organisation’s activities and the change they create (Ramia et al., 2021). For over 75 years RAV has been dedicated to achieving social impact through fostering positive, respectful, safe and fulfilling relationships for all Australians. Measuring social outcomes allows us to better understand the difference that we are making for individuals, families and communities.

This is our first social impact report and is focused on measurable outcomes across 3 interdependent levels of wellbeing: individual outcomes, interpersonal relationship outcomes and community outcomes. RAV’s Theory of Change is premised on how individual level changes contribute to improved family and relationship outcomes, ultimately leading to more cohesive communities (see our Theory of Change

at [socialimpact.rav.org.au](https://socialimpact.rav.org.au)). When these levels are examined together, we gain a deeper understanding of the broader positive impact our organisation has on society in the short and longer term.

Additionally, this report is a vital tool for evidence-based decision-making, continuous improvement, stakeholder engagement and transparent communication of our outcomes and impact. Outcome measurement is the first step towards evaluation and better understanding our programs (Ramia et al, 2021).

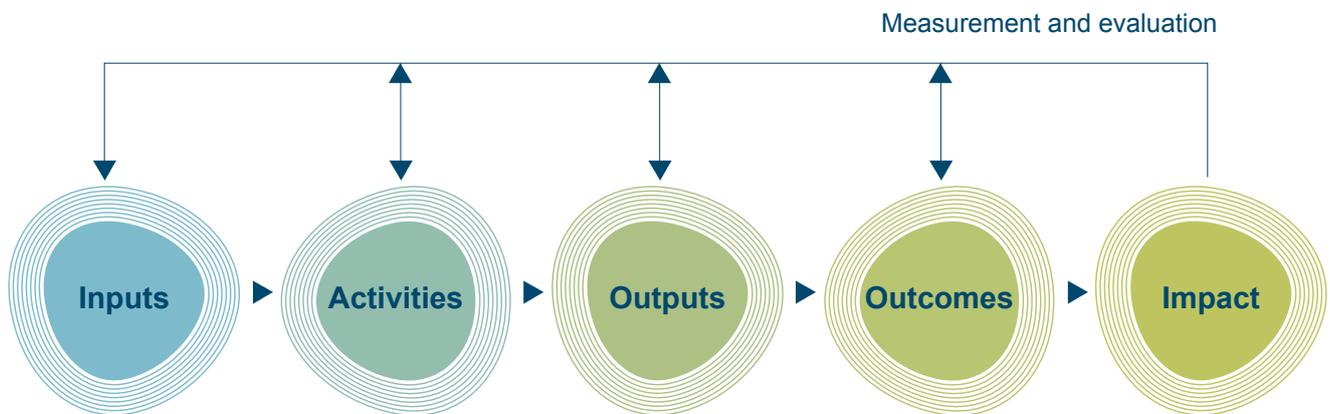
While attributing long-term change solely to a single intervention or organisation can be challenging, through the evaluation of the positive impact we’ve made on individuals and families, we can confidently affirm our contribution towards fostering sustainable, positive community and societal change.

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**Social impact encompasses the net consequences of our activities, including the changes that result from using our services (outcomes), alongside the measurement of what we do and the quality of our services (outputs).**

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**Figure 1: The process of creating and measuring change**



# How we create change

**We deliver a wide variety of family and relationship services across a continuum of prevention, early intervention, therapeutic services and support.**

We adopt a socio-ecological and person-centred approach to our services, holistically meeting the needs of families, which begins with addressing client needs. Evidence shows that personal wellbeing is strongly linked to our interpersonal relationships. These can be family relationships, couple relationships and social connections.

By building and empowering individuals' knowledge, awareness, skills and attitudes to create and

maintain healthy relationships, we contribute to thriving, resilient and cohesive communities. Cohesive communities are places where everyone feels a sense of belonging and safety. They support healthy child development, improve school climates, foster social connection, reduce family violence and improve overall wellbeing.

Our prevention and early intervention services aim to build skills in individuals, helping them develop healthy relationships and improve mental wellbeing. This can be achieved, for example, by strengthening social and emotional competencies, as well as enhancing parenting capacity. Our recovery and intervention services facilitate change through relational and collaborative practice with skilled professionals to achieve individual, client-led goals.

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Change happens when individuals and communities have the knowledge, awareness, skills and attitudes to build and maintain positive and healthy relationships.

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**Figure 2: Socio-ecological model of wellbeing (from RAV's Theory of Change)**





## An evidence-informed approach: Practice principles and common elements

An evidence-informed approach integrates research and evidence with practice knowledge and client perspectives (Alla & Joss, 2021; Moore, 2016). Our programs use a flexible, responsive and tailored approach that can be adapted to fit local contexts and individual family needs. This has led to the development of evidence-based principles and common elements that guide our work and build the capacity of practitioners to utilise evidence-informed techniques. In complex environments, principles and common factors promote a shared understanding of best practice (Patton, 2018).

Our practice frameworks are informed by sound theoretical and research bases, program logics, principles, common elements and evidence-based interventions or activities. Ongoing evaluation and learning inform further development and decision-making.

We know that the way services are delivered is just as important as what is delivered. That is why we place a strong emphasis on the relationships between practitioners and clients as the medium through which meaningful change occurs. This is particularly true when working with vulnerable families (Centre for Community Child Health, 2022; Ingram & Smith, 2018; Miller et al., 2014; Moloney, 2016).

The focus on improving outcomes is therefore threefold: ensuring families have access to evidence-informed programs and services that meet their needs; adapting these programs and services to context and aligning them with local service delivery models; and ensuring their effective implementation to achieve improved outcomes for families.

Our principles are constructed within 3 main focuses: centering our clients in everything we do; common practice elements that guide our work; and constant monitoring and improvement.

### Client-centred

We draw on strengths-based, trauma-informed and socio-ecological theories to holistically understand client context. Socio-ecological theory explores the interconnectedness between individuals and their broader social and environmental contexts. Our goal is to empower individuals in pursuing their goals based on their needs and values. Creating a culturally safe environment is crucial, and we prioritise client safety, self-determination and individual perspectives. This approach keeps our clients at the centre of our practice.

### Common practice elements

We aim for a balance between consistent, evidence-informed, best-practice approaches, and responsive, place-focused and flexible delivery. By engaging in relational, collaborative practice, we build strong therapeutic bonds. Evidence shows the quality of the relationship between practitioners and clients – or therapeutic alliance – is the medium through which effective services can be delivered (Miller et al., 2014; Moore, 2016).

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**Effective relationships are central to successful outcomes.'**

Ingram & Smith, 2018

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### Evaluation, learning and development

We continually assess and enhance our programs through regular monitoring and evaluation, driving continuous improvement and informed decision-making. We value our clients' experiences, feedback and insights, which guide our design and evaluation approaches. Seeking feedback helps us understand our impact and opportunities for improvement, shaping the direction of our future work.

Developing a culture of learning and evaluation is an important objective of integrating outcome measurement and client feedback into practice. Outcome evaluation improves clinical decision-making and effectiveness (Miller et al, 2014; Moloney, 2016). We routinely collect client feedback and outcome data and use this to tailor and inform service delivery. Our Outcome Framework incorporates key measures and indicators based on an overarching program logic and theory of change. This framework allows us to monitor both program and individual client progress along a continuum which includes client satisfaction, achievement of collaborative goals and progress in key outcome domains. Our approach is compatible with the Australian Government Department of Social Services' Standard Client Outcomes Reporting (SCORE).

Domain 1: Mental health and wellbeing

# Counselling: Improving mental wellbeing and family dynamics



In 2022–23, our counselling services primarily addressed family and relationship issues (50%) and improving mental health and wellbeing (25%). We provide individual, relationship and family counselling and focus on engagement, trust and collaboration between client and practitioner. This is because research demonstrates that the most important factors in predicting counselling outcomes are common elements such as the therapeutic relationship and being listened to, rather than a particular therapeutic modality (Moloney, 2016). Our practitioners use a variety of counselling strategies, to respond most appropriately to identified client needs.

Family and relationship interventions are characterised by stages that are common to all therapies as illustrated in the counselling client journey (see figure 3).

In 2023, we implemented a new process to collect automated electronic surveys from clients before counselling commences, at regular intervals throughout counselling and at service closure. This data enables us to compare paired average pre- and post-program data in key domains. Client-rated data collected between January and July 2023 indicated improvement in the 4 domains relevant to the service. The greatest improvement was in child wellbeing, with the average rating shifting from 'poor' to 'good'. Other reported improvements were to family functioning, personal and family safety, and mental health and wellbeing (see figure 4). The overall positive change for clients across all domains was reported as improving from 'average' to 'good', with 77% of clients stating they experienced an overall positive change.

3,684

Clients

4

Average number of sessions

2022–23

Figure 3: Counselling client journey

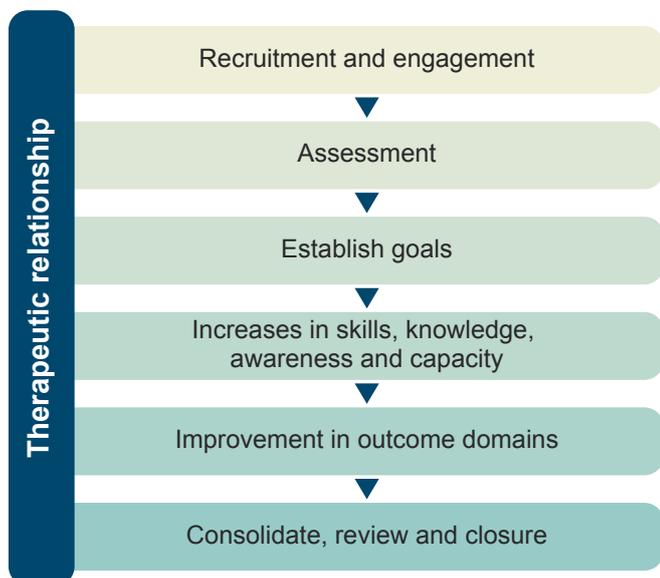
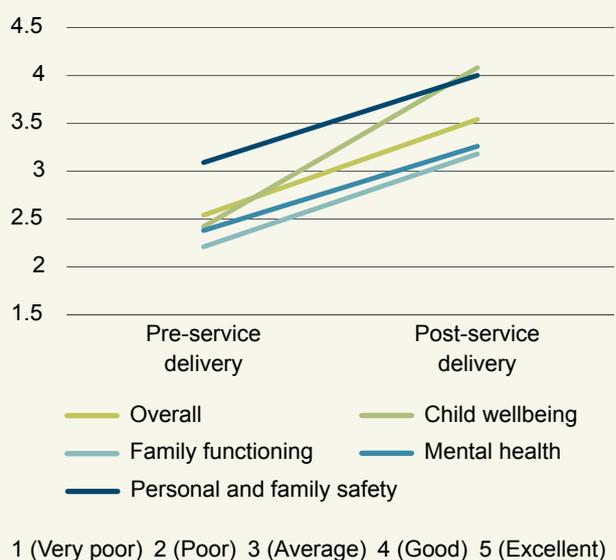


Figure 4: Counselling outcome measures



# headspace: Decreasing emotional distress



Since 2016, we have been delivering headspace services in Gippsland. headspace is an early intervention mental health service for young people aged 12 to 25 years. With an understanding of the specific ways that young people access and interact with services, headspace provides online and telephone support, as well as in-person counselling, information and education programs through centres and outreach locations. headspace highly values the people and systems that surround young people, and offers support for parents, carers and families.

The headspace model is designed to harness collaboration and includes a consortium of local agencies who deliver the various services, as well as providing insight and advice on emerging, developing and local needs. Governance, program development and evaluation at each centre is informed by Youth Advisory Groups consisting of local young people who have lived experience or interest in mental health.

In 2022–23, the top 3 presenting issues young people identified during their first visit to headspace were: feeling sad or depressed (33%), feeling anxious (18%) and problems with family or friend relationships (12%). The primary presenting issue as identified by practitioners was mental health and behaviour (73%).

The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) is implemented at key intervals throughout service engagement as a measure of headspace clients' emotional distress. There are 10 questions about emotional states, each with a 5-point scale. Total scores range between 10–50, with scores of 10–15 indicating low distress; 16–21 indicating moderate distress; 22–29 indicating high distress; and 30–50 indicating very high distress. A comparison of the average K10 scores young people recorded at their first and last session across our Bairnsdale, Sale and Wonthaggi centres demonstrates a reduction

867

Young people

4

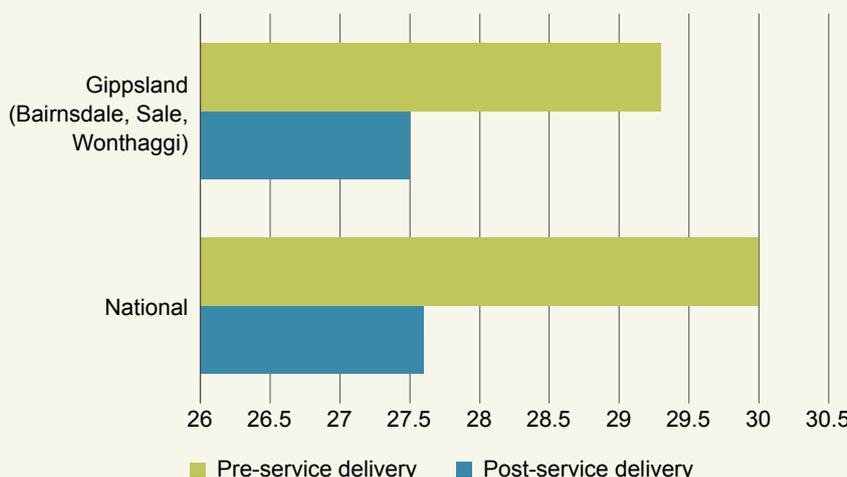
Average number of sessions

2022–23

from 29.3 to 27.5, broadly in line with the headspace national average (see figure 5). The numbers all remain in the 'high distress' section but indicate a consistent decrease in reported level of distress.

*Our headspace services are funded by the Australian Government. Administration of funding is carried out by Gippsland Primary Health Network.*

Figure 5: headspace K10 average



Domain 2: Child wellbeing

# i-Connect: Improving emotional and behavioural functioning



i-Connect is an early intervention mental health program for children, young people and their families in East Gippsland who are at risk of disengagement from school, work or the community. The program provides intensive therapeutic case management support. It draws on socio-ecological and systems models in its design and implementation. i-Connect emphasises collaborative and integrated service delivery as well as ensuring accessibility and cultural responsiveness are incorporated at all levels.

The program routinely administers the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), a widely recognised and internationally used emotional and behavioural screening questionnaire for assessing the mental health status of children and young people (Goodman, 1999). The total difficulties score ranges from 0–40 and is calculated by combining the emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer problems scores. Scores between 20 and 40 are considered very high, while scores between 17 and 20 are considered high. Young people’s average pre-test score was 21.39 and their post-test score was 17.84. This means that, on average, the young people in this sample moved from the very high range to the high range. On average, there was a 20% decrease in the total difficulties score for children and young people who participated in the i-Connect program (see figure 6).

*i-Connect is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services.*

### Impact story – Young person

A young person in the 11–17 age group completed the SDQ when first accessing the program in July 2022 and then at the end of service delivery in December 2022. There was a reported reduction in total difficulties across this time from 26 (very high total difficulties) to 19 (high total difficulties). They self-reported improvements in the areas of emotional problems, hyperactivity and conduct, while their score for peer problems remained the same. Their prosocial problems score moved from 4 to 5, indicating greater protective resources and improved ability to relate to peers while their score for the impact supplement moved from 4 to 0, indicating a reduced impact of these difficulties on the young person’s life – including home life, friendships, classroom learning and leisure activities.

### Impact story – Child

The parent of a young person in the 4–10 age group completed the SDQ questionnaire at the start of the program in May 2023 and at the end in June 2023. These 2 questionnaires showed a reduction in total difficulties from 20 (high total difficulties) to 16 (slightly raised). They reported improvements in the areas of emotional problems and hyperactivity.

212

Children and young people

8

Average number of sessions

12%

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients

2022–23

**Figure 6: i-Connect SDQ average total difficulties score**



# I like, like you: Increasing social and emotional competence and healthy relationships skills



'I like, like you: A healthy relationships program' (ILLY) is a family violence prevention program delivered in schools. It is designed to be implemented as a whole-school approach that promotes the connections between healthy relationships, equality, and mental health and wellbeing. The program's pedagogical approach incorporates experiential, interactive and didactic activities, to build on students' knowledge and practical skills. There is a strong focus on enhancing students' social and emotional competencies in the key areas of self- and social-awareness, self- and social-management and responsible decision-making. Evidence shows that building these areas leads to more cohesive classroom environments (Zins & Elias, 2006), supportive and respectful relationship behaviours (Caprara et al., 2000), increased academic success (Denham et al., 2010) and improved mental health outcomes (Durlack et al., 2011).

## Student focus group

In June 2023, we facilitated a focus group with 9 students from year 8 who had recently participated in the ILLY program. They were asked what they had learned in the areas of emotional intelligence, stereotypes, conflict resolution and managing relationships.

The students identified areas such as open communication, self-awareness, respect, self-management and empathy as the most important skills and knowledge they had built over the course of the ILLY program.

‘The program affirms and supports other conversations and activities the students do in the curriculum. [It] gives students an opportunity to have a voice, to consolidate learning about respectful relationships and communication.’

School staff member

## Student survey

Students are asked to complete a self-assessment at the start and end of the ILLY program. The survey aims to capture the students' learning progress in the key social-emotional areas, as well as behaviours associated with safety and understanding of gender inequality. Consistent with previous routine internal evaluations (2020), the 2022-23 surveys indicated improvements in communication and conflict resolution skills, as well as increased understanding of emotions, empathy, and healthy and unhealthy relationship behaviours. The largest change that the students identified was in their understanding of the importance of gender equality.

## Staff survey

Staff are also surveyed about how the program meets the needs of their school and their opinion on the best thing about the program. The responses from 2022–23 highlighted improvements in students' emotional regulation and communication

845

Victorian school students

600

Parents access to information video

150

Information sessions delivered to educators

2022–23

## School staff survey

8.6/10 Average program satisfaction

8.5/10 Average rating of how the program met school needs

skills. Staff also noted that important topics were introduced in a way that prompted ongoing discussion that would continue after the program itself had finished. They observed that the program was a good fit for their school because it was adapted to suit both the context of the school and the capabilities of the student cohort, and because it could be integrated with the schools' broader respectful relationships curriculum.

Domain 3: Personal and family safety

# Family Safety Contact: Improving family safety and connectedness

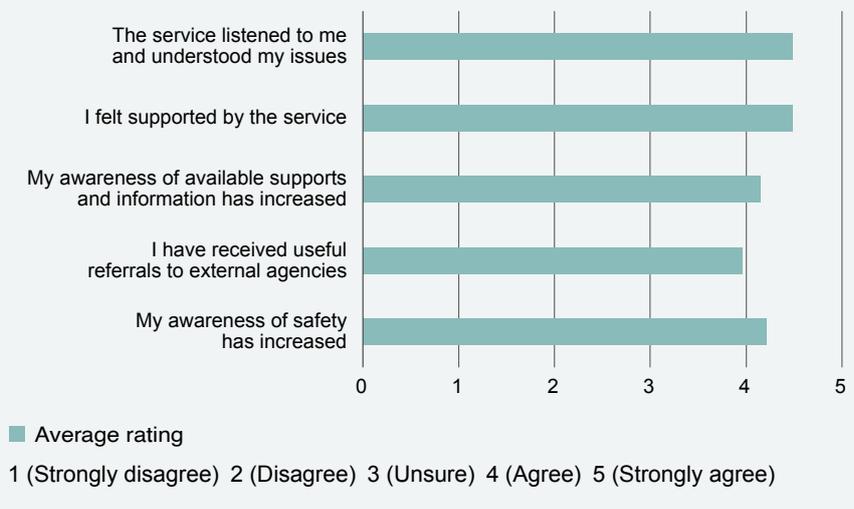


We provide a Family Safety Contact service to establish safety and support for partners and former partners of participants in our Men’s Behaviour Change Programs (MBCPs). In a 2020 report, Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS) found that by providing a Family Safety Contact service – which incorporates case management, counselling and support for people experiencing violence – not only is the safety of families enhanced, but the efficacy of the MBCP is improved (ANROWS, 2020). Including the perspectives of victim-survivors is an important priority for future research and evaluations of family violence services as well as perpetrator interventions (Bell & Coates, 2022). Our Family Safety Contact service has implemented a routine survey to collect a combination of qualitative and quantitative data about the impact of the service, as well as the MBCP.

In 2022–23, Family Safety Contact respondents identified that they felt validated and had an increased confidence around their decision to leave their previous relationship where applicable. Additionally, they reported an increased ability to relate and empathise with their children, and generally felt stronger and more relaxed about both their current and future family situation.

When asked to identify the best aspect of the Family Safety Contact service, respondents overwhelmingly spoke to the importance of continuity of care from a person who understood the specific issues and challenges that the respondents faced.

Figure 7: Family Safety Contact survey



**I have become more confident in how I deal with the circumstance around me, both by making supported choices for myself and my children and how to communicate with others about our situation.'**

Family Safety Contact client

594

Family Safety Contact clients

5

Average number of sessions

2022–23

In relation to the impact of MBCPs on their partners or former partners, 50% of respondents identified a positive change. The most notable change was in parenting and positive interactions with children, followed by a decrease in violent behaviour and an improvement in overall behaviour and attitudes.



# Men's Behaviour Change Programs: Improving emotional self-regulation and accountability

We have been delivering MBCPs in various formats since 2005 and are one of the largest providers of these programs in Victoria. Drawing on a strong evidence base and informed by national standards and guidelines, our 20-week MBCP curriculum focuses on promoting gender equality, holding men accountable for using violent and controlling behaviour, challenging attitudes and beliefs underlying this behaviour, teaching healthy relationships skills, building empathy and emotional regulation, and increasing personal insight and awareness of the impact of violence on women and children. We frequently contribute to the strategic development of perpetrator responses and building the evidence base of the Victorian specialist family violence service system.

We routinely collect anonymous pre- and post-program surveys from MBCP participants, through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. These self-assessment surveys are focused on the key learning areas and skills taught in the program. In 2022–23, 4 key areas were self-assessed as having the greatest change (see figure 8). These results show that MBCP participants have begun to build an understanding of the negative impact that their violent behaviour has on those around them, as well as a greater ability to manage their emotions and actions in times of stress.

Participants were asked to identify the most significant change for them and their families as a result of the program, and then rate the extent of this change on a scale of 1–10. This question was

Figure 8: Top 4 areas of self-assessed change in MBCP survey



‘I’ve got so much to learn about myself and my feelings. Opening myself up to learning and listening to help create a better me for the future.’

MBCP participant

694

MBCP participants

75

MBCP programs delivered

2022–23

adapted from the Most Significant Change evaluation technique (Davies & Dart, 2005). The responses were looked at in relation to the 7 outcome areas in the MBCP program logic. The largest self-reported changes were in the areas of increased awareness of what constitutes family violence, emotional regulation, empathy and personal insight.

Domain 4: Family functioning

# Lawyer-Assisted Family Dispute Resolution: Reducing conflict and increasing communication between co-parents



As a leading provider of Family Dispute Resolution (FDR), we are committed to regularly conducting research and evaluation of FDR and related services. FDR is a type of mediation which assists separating couples to resolve family law disputes related to parenting, property or financial matters. Lawyer-Assisted FDR is offered to our clients in place of, or in addition to, our regular FDR services, to reduce barriers to participation. We are currently evaluating outcomes from the Lawyer-Assisted FDR service offered at our 2 centres in Sunshine in conjunction with 2 Community Legal Centres. Our initial findings are based on preliminary survey data and semi-structured interviews conducted with Lawyer-Assisted FDR clients, collected since February 2023.

Clients perceived that the greatest value of the program came from lawyers' involvement. Contributing to this perception was the support and intervention lawyers provided in preparing and responding to proposals; providing advice and perspective on settlement likelihoods, consequences, and options; and giving reassurance.

Lawyer-Assisted FDR was considered an affordable alternative to litigation especially suited to complex or high conflict cases often characterised by communication breakdown and/or involving a party with limited access to children. The service was found to be child focused, and conducive to clients expressing their views.

### Impact

Overall, 65% of clients who participated in the evaluation expressed satisfaction with the process, and over 50% of clients were satisfied with the outcomes from the service. A large majority of clients felt that lawyer assistance helped them to better understand their position, understand outcomes from the session, better respond to proposals and gain confidence to participate. The service

58

Clients

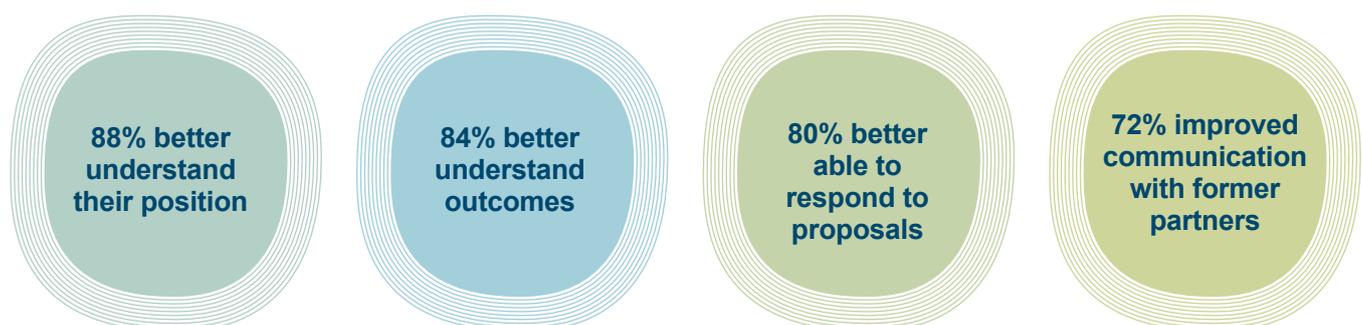
29

Sessions

Lawyer-Assisted FDR Sunshine, 2022–23

was considered effective in improving communication with former partners. The mediator's role was viewed positively; 75% of clients found the mediator to be issue-focused, helpful in providing information and advice, and impartial. Feeling supported in various ways – for example, being prepared and informed about what to expect – played a crucial role in determining whether clients felt the service helped them.

Figure 9: Lawyer-Assisted FDR evaluation outcomes



# early matters: Enhancing family dynamics, parental confidence and healthy child development



We have been delivering 'early matters' in the City of Brimbank and the City of Ballarat since 2015. The service combines evidence-based universal parenting programs, parenting education sessions and one-on-one tailored family support. It aims to improve child wellbeing and early development by enhancing parental confidence and skills and strengthening positive family relationships. Evidence shows that in the early years, the most important protective and preventive factors in the healthy development of children and young people are safe, stable and nurturing parent-child and family relationships (Crouch et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2017). By focusing on the link between family relationships and improved social and emotional competencies in these early years, our service aims to contribute to improved outcomes for mental health and wellbeing, and healthy and respectful relationships into the future (ARACY, 2014; Hervatin & Hinkley, 2021).

Our internal evaluations (2019) indicate improvements in parental confidence, increased access to support, greater social and emotional awareness, and reduced behavioural concerns. In response to evaluation and evolving community need, 'early matters' continues to develop and adapt to community needs.

*'early matters' is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services.*

## Impact story

**Family:** Mother, father and 2 young children under 7, one of whom was recently diagnosed with autism.

**Interventions:** The mother participated in Tuning in to Kids™, Circle of Security®, and one-on-one family support over a 6–8 month journey. The father also completed Circle of Security®.

“ [Before coming to early matters] I used to cry and scream every day and didn't know how to deal with my sons' tantrums. Since completing [Tuning in to Kids™], I have changed from a task focused parent to a parent who contemplates what my children are thinking and feeling. I noticed that I can [emotion] coach in situations where I would have 100% lost it before. My priority has shifted from getting all the household chores done to now keeping peace and emotional safety in our household. My relationship with my husband has got better. From time to time the idea of divorce is still on the table, but I see a kindness in my husband towards our children since doing the course and he has stepped up massively. All I can control is my reaction in our relationship and this is making a calmer and more peaceful environment.”

112

Evidence-based parenting program participants

749

Education session participants

150

Families supported one-on-one

9

Average number of sessions

2022–23

Domain 5: Connection and belonging

# Yarra Communities That Care: Improving community connections and support



Yarra Communities That Care® is a network of 24 local partner agencies who share a commitment to support the healthy development of young people in the City of Yarra. Since 2017, our Melbourne Family Relationship Centre’s Community Liaison Officer has led the ‘Strengthen Family Relationships’ priority area for the initiative. This involves coordinating the delivery of the Tuning in to Teens™ program, information webinars for parents and a facilitator network.

Tuning in to Teens™ is an evidence-based program for parents of adolescents aged 10–18 years. The program has been shown to improve parenting knowledge and skills and parent–teen relationships, and reduce family conflict. Randomised control trials of the broader ‘Tuning in’ suite of programs have also demonstrated that early adolescents with parents who completed the program have lower levels of symptoms associated with anxiety and depression (Havighurst et. al, 2020).

We conduct routine evaluations of our Tuning in to Teens™ programs delivered through the Yarra initiative.

In 2022-23 these evaluations, which involve parents’ self-report, indicated improvements in emotional literacy and parent-child relationships:

- **100%** were doing things differently as a parent
- **88%** had a stronger connection with their child
- **98%** had a better understanding of their child’s emotions and behaviours
- **98%** were more confident to respond to their child’s emotions.

Building on the positive feedback and program achievements, our organisation is leading an evaluation to understand the collaborative and placed-based approach of the Yarra network. Informed by a comprehensive theory of change, we are finding evidence of systemic change in the community that is being achieved by fostering genuine collaboration between partner agencies and authentic partnerships with schools, and further improving models of practice across agencies and practitioners in the City of Yarra.

### Facilitator Network

- 12** Partner agencies
- 18** Partner schools
- 27** Facilitators

### Tuning in to Teens™ delivery

- 87** Participating parents
- 159** Children impacted
- 9** Programs
- 7** Locations

### Information sessions

- 4** Seminars/webinars
- 560** Participants

2022–23

Figure 10: Simplified Theory of Change

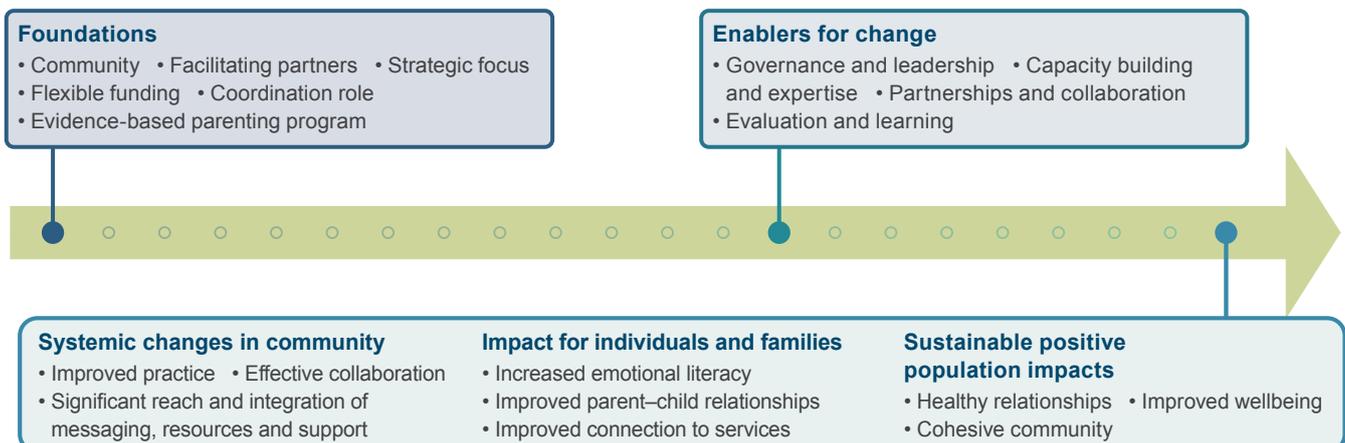
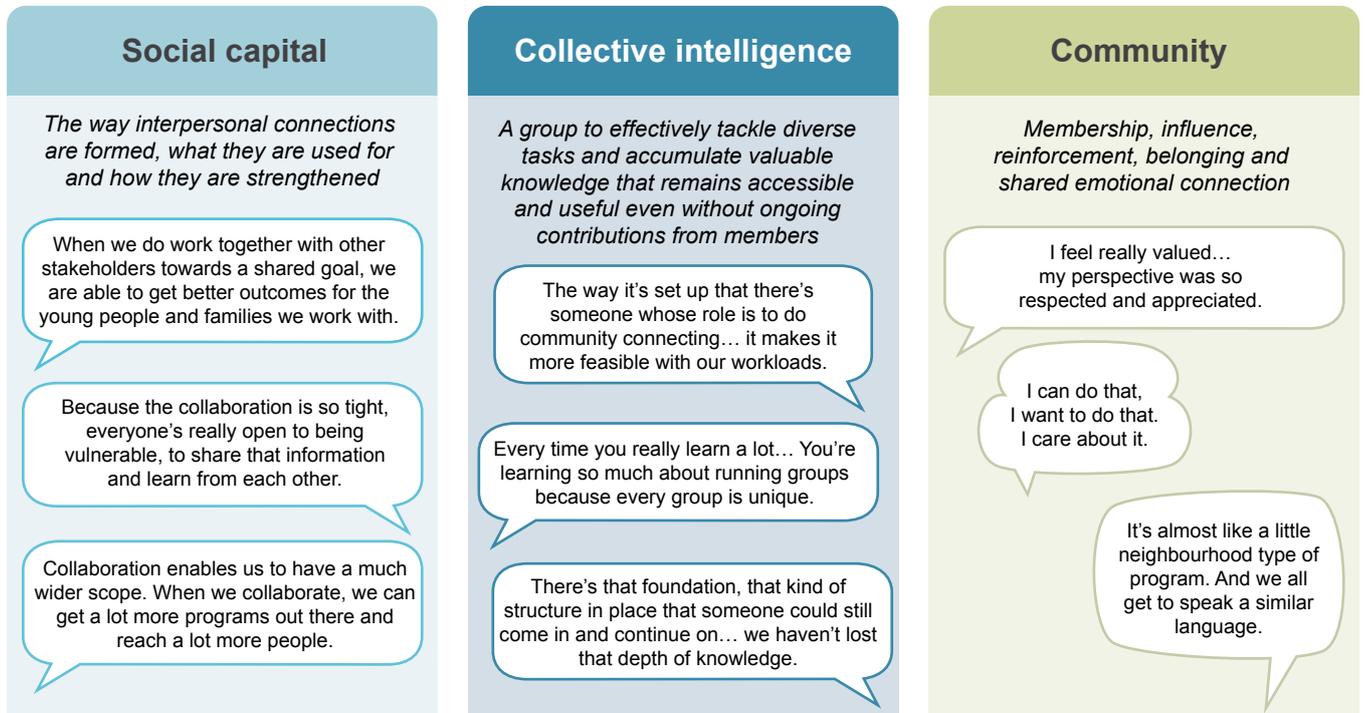


Figure 11: Yarra Facilitator Network focus group themes



**Focus groups and interviews: Collaboration and support**

As part of this evaluation, 4 focus groups and interviews were held in early 2023, with 9 parenting group facilitators in the Facilitator Network. The facilitators came from a variety of partner organisations: cohealth, Department of Education, drummond street services, Victoria Police, RAV and Yarra City Council.

These feedback sessions provided insight into how the network had created a working environment for facilitators that enabled them to grow a sense of belonging and investment in the program and in the facilitator community. Three main themes were constructed from these interviews, each of which reflect the overarching importance of collaboration and support in the approach of the Yarra Communities That Care® Facilitator Network.

One of the main ways facilitators felt supported, particularly in the initial stages of the initiative, was through the active coordination provided by our Community Liaison Officer.

**‘If all [stakeholders] collaborate toward the shared vision, and are guided by a sufficiently equipped facilitating partner, then enabling conditions for systemic changes can be created and realised. Over time, community and systems-level changes occur, and this will ultimately lead to sustainable and positive changes for people living in the area of the [place-based approach].’**

Dart, 2018

Facilitators highlighted how this support had both practical and emotional components. The practical components removed some of the more onerous, administrative tasks from the facilitators, enabling them to focus on their

interactions with parents and schools. The emotional support provided validation, encouragement and social connections to bolster their confidence and sense of belonging.

The key takeaways from the facilitator feedback provide a useful guide for implementing programs in geographically bound, yet diverse and siloed, organisations. Inter-organisation communication is key, as it leads to group cohesion, a broader understanding of available services and practice approaches, and wider reach for program implementation. This process of communication and collaboration requires scaffolding and support, by having both a central person or group who can act as coordinator until the connections are strong enough to be self-sustaining, and through a non-hierarchical structure with a culture of openness and respect.

A full report is being prepared for release in late 2023. Moving forward, as an organisation we will draw on the lessons and achievements of the Yarra Communities That Care® initiative to inform the implementation of other place-based approaches.

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**Central Office (Camberwell)**

1183 Toorak Road

Ph: (03) 8573 2222

enquiries@rav.org.au

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