



Connecting what matters:

Children and young people with disability and their families share their views on how services can help when they experience domestic and family violence

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Thank you to the children and young people, family members and workers who contributed to this report. We know it is not easy to talk about such hard times, and we learned an incredible amount from you.

Know where you can get support

Sometimes reading people's stories about violence can be uncomfortable or distressing.

If you feel this way, or are looking for help because you or someone you know is being harmed, contact these services:


Read more about the project

This resource draws directly from the "Connecting the dots" project, where researchers heard from children and young people with disability and their families about what is most important to them.


[Head to the ANROWS website to download the full report and other project resources.](#)

Suggested citation


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 [1800RESPECT](tel:1800737732)
1800 737 732

 **The National Disability Abuse and Neglect Hotline**
1800 880 052

 [Say It Out Loud](https://www.sayitoutloud.org.au)
www.sayitoutloud.org.au

 [Kids Helpline](tel:1800551800)
1800 55 1800

 [13YARN](tel:139276)
13 92 76



Hearing and responding to the things that matter to children and young people with disability and their families when they experience domestic and family violence is a priority for all government, non-government and community organisations working to prevent and respond to domestic and family violence.

This summary brings the voices of children and young people to the front of the conversation so people working in policy and practice can hear their perspective on what helps. It is designed to support all organisations working to deliver services to children and young people with disability where domestic and family violence may be present.



What stood out from the research?



The needs of children and young people with disability who experience domestic and family violence are not currently being met. Children and young people's families and workers had to struggle, often for a long time, to get them the funding and support they needed.



Children and young people with disability often become socially isolated if they experience domestic or family violence. **They can feel alone and believe that no one cares.**



Children and young people with disability need support quickly when they experience violence at home. This support needs to be *trauma-informed* and *youth-focused*. They also need support to help them recover.

How did we learn from children and young people with disability, families and workers?

We did research interviews with three distinct groups of people.

Children and young people with disability who had experienced violence at home



We learned about the experiences of 36 children and young people.

Of these, 12 young people spoke to us themselves. We found ways that helped people to feel comfortable speaking with us, including using pictorial maps and games, and spending time together.

There were other children and young people whose experiences we learned about from their families. There were several reasons why these children could not speak to us directly. These reasons included the impacts of trauma, complex communication needs and no longer being in their family's care.

Families of children and young people with disability who had experienced violence at home



We spoke with 14 family members, mainly mothers of children and young people with disability.

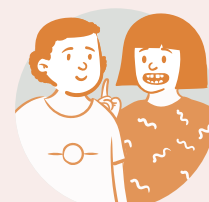
People who provide services to children and families



We talked with 46 people who worked with children and their families in all kinds of services, including disability, violence, child and family support, therapy, and youth services.

Some of the study participants were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse, but this was only a small number.

To keep people's identity private, we didn't use their real names. Names in this report have been changed.

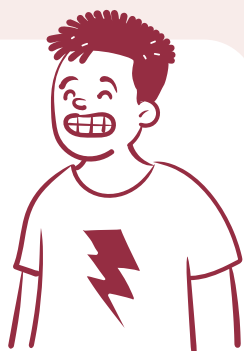


What was most important to them to share?



Isaac's self portrait, with kittens

Children are children first. They are loved and part of families that see their strengths and value. They contribute important things to their families and their communities.



Having safe adults in close circles of support helped children and young people feel safe. Many did not feel that they had people outside of their families they could turn to for help. They felt stressed and anxious about their everyday life and had relationships that worried them. They didn't always feel safe.



I'm a good person. I care for others and try to make things better for others ... I'm very emotional with things ... If someone says something bad or keeps a secret, it makes me very worried and then I just don't like that.

(Aadi, aged 8 to 11)



It was hard for children and young people to have what matters to them heard when there was a lot going on in their family.

So, I need a new ... my bed is just a mattress on the floor. And do you think that's comfortable?

(Sam, aged 8 to 11)

Sometimes feelings come out in behaviour, which can be hard for everyone. Children and parents found it very hard to get help with this.



Violence at home caused a lot of change in families, and sometimes this was very hard. It was hard to keep friendships and make new ones. Children and young people and parents sometimes felt alone and that there wasn't anyone that could help when they needed it.

What does it mean to be trauma-informed and youth-focused?

Trauma-informed

Working in a trauma-informed way means understanding that violence is scary, causes harm and can have a big impact on a child or young person for a long time. When the adults working with children and young people are trauma-informed they use their knowledge about the impacts of trauma to guide all of their responses. This can be from how they plan to speak with a child to how they co-ordinate activities, and how they understand a child's or young person's actions and reactions.

Youth-focused

Working in a youth-focused way means recognising that support needs to be there for everyone in the family, and especially for children and young people. This help for children and young people needs to be separate from the help that other people in their family might get. This might look like making sure children and young people are spoken to separately, including them in planning and decisions from the very beginning, and treating them as experts in their own lives.

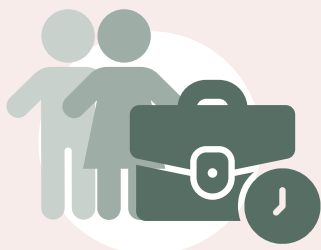
What did services do?



Some families got help from workers and services – people employed to help them.

Sometimes children and young people and their families had great workers. They got to know each other well, listened, and responded to what people said they needed.

Children, young people and families felt lucky when they got good workers, but it didn't always last long.



Other times, workers did not listen well, or get to know the children or young people, or the ways that they shared the things that were important to them. **Workers often had very little time to spend with families and children.**

... if you keep changing who the provider is, then that means upheaval, and having to try and establish trust with a new person again. If you actually have finally established trust with someone and they are good, you need to be able to have funding to continue working with them, with that person, not some other new person and then another new person and another new person.

(Lindsay, mother)



Workers often knew about how to support people with trauma, or with disability, or violence at home. **They rarely knew about ways to support people with all three of those things at once.** But that is what people needed.



It was very hard for families to get the funding and support they needed to help their children. This was because there were:

- long waiting lists
- lots of forms to fill out
- very confusing rules and lots of different services to find and get help from
- many delays for all the families in getting the help they needed.

It was too hard to deal with confusing and difficult systems at the same time as dealing with violence at home.



There're two things happening here, the NDIS and the way that family violence services work, and neither of them are really prioritising the children's voice

(DFV practitioner)

There were not many examples of workers listening to children and young people with disability about what they wanted – either in their NDIS support, or in the way they and their families were supported with violence at home.



Everyone said that services need to do better. And everyone we spoke to in services was keen to do better. They saw this as important and wanted to improve how children and young people with disability are supported.

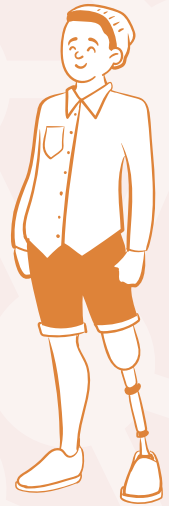
What can we learn from this research?

Despite the terrible experiences they had been through, lots of people shared hopes and ideas about how things could improve. They all wanted to make life better for children and young people.

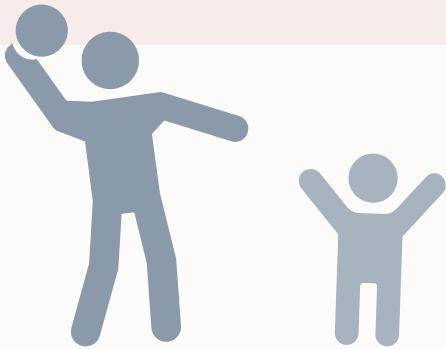
These ideas are shared below. Some are simple things that workers can do today. Others will take resources and policy commitment. For all these ideas, we need to see children and young people with disability at the centre of their own experiences and as experts in their own lives.

At the heart of each idea is investing in children and young people with disability to ensure that help for the effects of violence is available quickly and effectively.

More thinking is needed to make sure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people with disability, and people from different cultures and who speak different languages, have help that works for them and their communities.



Here's what we heard children and young people need to make their everyday lives better



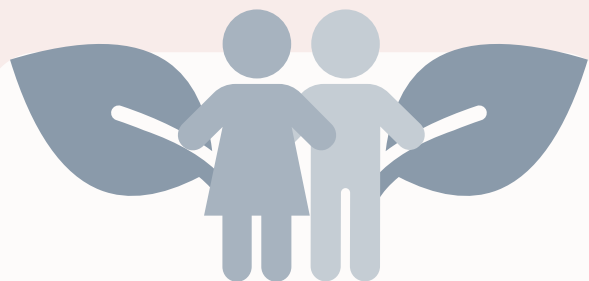
Planned, thoughtful ways for children's and young people's ideas and what matters to them to be heard and acted on by the services they use. Adults can look for better ways to talk to children and young people and find out what is important to them, like drawing together, taking a walk, spending time playing a game, or learning what young people need to be able to have their say and for adults to really listen.



Adults need to help children feel safe talking about these important things. They need to listen to what is important to children and young people and build relationships with them. The same also needs to be done with the people that children and young people trust. Their families and their workers are examples.



An understanding of how disability and trauma are closely linked for children and young people with significant support needs, and how this can make things very hard for children and young people.



Help for children and young people to feel better and recover. To do this they need workers who really understand them and their needs and how to do things that really help.

Here's what we learned services can do to improve



We need to put children first and realise that children and young people with disability have their own trauma, needs, likes and dislikes. They are still very much part of their families even when they are not living with them.



Workers need to better understand disability and the experiences of children and young people when there is violence at home. When workers only think about one part of a child's life they can miss important things. This can make things worse.



Good workers need good support too, so children and young people can get good-quality workers every time, not just sometimes. **This means training and supporting workers in their jobs.**

Here's what we learned about how systems can be improved



Children and young people with disability have the right to support that meets their needs. It should not rely on their families having funding or making a good application. **Children and their families might need someone to fight for them. This is about making sure that everyone is working together and they get help.** This is very important when there is violence at home.



Lots of people told us that children and young people didn't get enough help. There were many reasons for this. Workers said children's and young people's problems didn't fit their role. Some workers thought the problems were too big, or that they couldn't help families by themselves. Instead of "dropping" them, workers from different services and systems need to work together and learn from each other. **Children and young people with disability and their families can have lots of problems and workers need to get together to make sure that all their needs are met.**

References

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