

# ANROWS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH  
ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY  
*to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children*

Department of Social Services  
GPO Box 9820  
Canberra ACT 2601  
By email: [NationalFrameworkfeedback@dss.gov.au](mailto:NationalFrameworkfeedback@dss.gov.au)

## **Re: Successor plan for the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020**

Dear the Hon Michelle Landry MP

ANROWS thanks the Department of Social Services for the opportunity to respond to the *Implementing the successor plan to the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020* consultation paper.

ANROWS is an independent, not-for-profit company established as an initiative under Australia's *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* (the National Plan). Our primary function is to provide an accessible evidence base for developments in policy and practice design for prevention and response to violence against women, nationally. Every aspect of our work is motivated by the right of women and their children to live free from violence and in safe communities. We recognise, respect and respond to diversity among women and their children, and we are committed to reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Primary (core) funding for ANROWS is jointly provided by the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments of Australia. ANROWS is also, from time to time, directly commissioned to undertake work for an individual jurisdiction, and successfully tenders for research and evaluation work. ANROWS is registered as a harm prevention charity and deductible gift recipient, governed by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission (ACNC).

The submission provided below is focused upon the related strategies, strategic priorities and priority groups outlined in the consultation paper. It draws on evidence from rigorous peer-reviewed research, including relevant ANROWS research.

We would be very pleased to assist the Department of Social Services further, as required.

Yours sincerely



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## Response to consultation paper

### Related strategies and consultations

Responding to the needs of children and young people emerged as a top priority in the development of [Australia's National Research Agenda to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children \(ANRA\) 2020–2022](#). ANRA was developed by ANROWS as a framework for, and guidance on, priority areas of research and research topics for academics, researchers, research funding bodies and governments across Australia working to prevent and respond to violence against women. As a result, the [2020–2022 ANROWS Core Grant Research Program](#) is focused on producing evidence to support policy and practice design responding to the needs of children and young people, with a focus on children and young people in marginalised populations. Comprising eight projects that collectively address the research gaps identified in ANRA, this body of research will advance the evidence base in relation to effective prevention and response strategies to identify and address:

- experiences of children's and young people's exposure to domestic and family violence (DFV)
- the short- and long-term physical, emotional and psychological impacts of DFV on children and young people
- adolescent violence and harmful sexual behaviours, with a focus on how various social, cultural and socio-economic contexts mediate children's and young people's exposure to and use of violence and harmful sexual behaviours
- how services and systems can respond more directly to the needs of children and young people to mitigate against the risks associated with exposure to DFV
- effective responses to young people's use of violence and harmful sexual behaviours (ANROWS, 2020a).

ANROWS looks forward to delivering this body of rigorous, peer-reviewed research to the Department of Social Services over the next 12 months and playing a key role in helping to address the strategic priorities outlined in the successor plan to the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020* (the National Framework).

While ANROWS's work will no doubt be captured in the successor to the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* (the National Plan), it will also have important intersections with this successor plan to the National Framework. As such we thought it best to flag the importance of the interconnection between these two strategic documents, as a means of ensuring work and resources are effectively and efficiently utilised by avoiding duplication or siloing across different sectors.

**Recommendation 1:** Indicate clearly how the successor plans to the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* and the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020* interact with each other to ensure that work and resources are not duplicated or siloed across different sectors.

## **Strategic priority: A national approach to early intervention and targeted support for children and families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage**

Early intervention in childhood experiences of trauma and violence is recommended across a number of ANROWS reports, including research into adolescents exhibiting violence in the home by Campbell and colleagues (2020). Some research points to additional benefits that may stem from early intervention with trauma-exposed boys and girls, like reductions in some future incidences of complex trauma (Salter et al., 2020). The evidence base also indicates that intervening early in child sexual abuse may help to prevent DFV, with the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2016 Personal Safety Survey showing that around one in three women who experienced abuse before the age of 15 also experienced partner violence as an adult (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2017). Women who experienced childhood abuse were nearly three times more likely to experience partner violence than those who had not been abused as children (ABS, 2017). Including early intervention for children experiencing DFV and/or child sexual abuse specifically would help to facilitate the important link between the National Framework and the successor plan to the National Plan.

**Recommendation 2:** Prevent and reduce the intergenerational impact of childhood trauma via pre- and postnatal care and screening for abuse and violence, trauma-informed parental and family support programs, and early intervention for children exposed to trauma.

ANROWS research indicates that mothers can encounter a lack of services and responses when seeking therapeutic assistance, particularly for older teenagers or young adults with mental health problems linked to exposure to violent and abusive behaviour (Kaspiew et al., 2017). Sourcing appropriate services can be even more difficult when adolescents exposed to childhood trauma themselves begin to use violence, as the report *The PIPA project: Positive Interventions for Perpetrators of Adolescent violence in the home* points out (Campbell et al., 2020).

As indicated above, young people with harmful sexual behaviours are a focus of our new research program, the [2020–2022 ANROWS Core Grant Research Program](#):

- [“Whole-of-family Responses to AVITH Program \(WRAP\) around families experiencing AVITH” \(the WRAP Around project\)](#) led by Elena Campbell will provide new evidence to support the development of interventions which can address all family members in households where adolescents are using violence in the home.
- [“Adolescent family violence in Australia: A national study of prevalence, use of and exposure to violence, and support needs for young people”](#) led by Associate Professor Kate Fitz-Gibbon will help to inform policy decisions on the number and type of support services needed and allocation of resources for responding to adolescent violence in the home.
- Associate Professor John Rynne is leading [“Adverse childhood experiences and the intergenerational transmission of domestic and family violence in young people who engage in](#)

[harmful sexual behaviour and violence against women](#)”, which will examine the nature and extent of adverse childhood experiences, including DFV, for male youth who have perpetrated harmful sexual behaviour and sexual violence against women and children.

- Dr Georgina Sutherland will focus on the increasing evidence of the significant intersection of adolescent violence in the home with disability in “[Building a framework to prevent and respond to young people with disability who use violence at home](#)”.

The findings of this subset of our research program will inform evidence-based initiatives relating to support both for victims and survivors of DFV and for children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours.

**Recommendation 3:** Ensure that the needs of children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours are specifically addressed in this National Framework.

Existing ANROWS research also emphasises the importance of seeing children as victims and survivors of DFV in their own right (Humphreys et al., 2020). This research points out that good practice at the intersections of DFV and other adult-focused services includes strong risk assessments for children and an emphasis on seeing the child as a client in their own right and so assessing and supporting their needs (Humphreys et al., 2020).

**Recommendation 4:** Increased attention and focus is given to strategies, programs and resources that recognise adults as parents and enhance visibility of their children in DFV, alcohol and other drugs, and mental health interventions.

ANROWS research consistently recommends an integrated service system. This is in keeping with the National Framework’s guiding principle relating to improved implementation across governments and services with structures that facilitate collaboration across Australian Government portfolio area and state and territory governments. In a synthesis paper entitled *Working across sectors to meet the needs of clients experiencing domestic and family violence* (ANROWS, 2020b) we have brought together insights and recommendations from across this body of research. Key to this evidence is the way that training in a common framework (for example, Safe & Together) can assist all services, particularly child protection services, to understand the way DFV impacts parenting and thus improve responses to children (Humphreys & Healey, 2017). The utility of this model across different systems is evidenced in the way that it is currently being rolled out by the Federal Circuit Court of Australia in parenting matters in three registries (Parramatta, Adelaide and Brisbane) in a trial entitled “The Lighthouse Project” (Federal Circuit Court of Australia, 2020).

**Recommendation 5:** Use the insights from *Working across sectors to meet the needs of clients experiencing domestic and family violence* (2020b) to enhance collaboration and integration across the service system as it relates to children with experiences of family violence.

## Priority groups

As we mentioned above, our entire current core research program focuses on children and young people. While some projects are exploring young people's use of violence, the other projects examine, in different ways, the impact of experiences of DFV on children and young people. There are projects focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children exposed to DFV; the mental health of children exposed to DFV; and children impacted by the intersecting risk factors of DFV, drug and alcohol issues, and mental health issues. Additionally, emerging findings from the projects on young people's use of violence or harmful sexual behaviours highlight that exposure to DFV is a common factor in their histories.

ANROWS has commissioned research relevant to all of the diverse stakeholders listed in the National Framework and would welcome the opportunity to be involved in the design and implementation of individual actions under the National Framework once it is launched. Outlined below we respond to two priority groups as an example of the expertise we can provide.

### *Children and young people with disability and/or parents and carers with disability*

From the current round of ANROWS research, three projects will have particular relevance to understanding experiences of children with disability.

1. ["Connecting the dots: Understanding the DFV experiences of children and young people with disability within and across sectors"](#) led by Professor Sally Robinson from Flinders University.

This research will explore how children and young people with disability who have experienced DFV experience support from services, and how well those services meet their and their families' needs. Previous research has found that disability services are regularly and notably absent from cross-sector collaborative responses to DFV, and a lack of understanding, resources, awareness of or education about people with disability has led to a lack of "disability literacy" among mainstream services. This can mean that services responding to violence may not recognise or record disability. Alongside this, disability services lack expertise around violence. Therefore, responses tend to be siloed.

2. ["Building a framework to prevent and respond to young people with disability who use violence at home"](#) led by Dr Georgina Sutherland from the University of Melbourne.

There is emerging evidence that adolescent family violence (AFV) has significant intersections with disability. This project, which will include direct input from young people with disability and their families, will develop a framework that examines and explains the intersection of AFV, gender and disability. This framework will help to address the potentially harmful lifelong consequences of decisions made about young people with disability who use violence at home, where a lack of a common understanding about what drives and contributes to AFV results in responses that can entrench harm.

3. ["WRAP around families experiencing adolescent violence in the home \(AVITH\): Towards a collaborative service response"](#) led by Elena Campbell from the Centre for Innovative Justice at RMIT University.

This project is building on prior research (see the “PIPA project” below) that explored legal responses to adolescent violence in the home (AVITH). In particular, it is responding to the findings that families experiencing AVITH often manage multiple complexities and have limited access to service support. The previous report showed that the majority of existing interventions focus primarily on AVITH, without an opportunity to respond to the complexity across families. Little is known, then, about prior service support, impacts on siblings or the extent to which addressing women’s experiences of intimate partner violence may mitigate the emergence of AVITH. This project will fill a gap in evidence and practice, supporting the development of a whole-of-family, collaborative practice framework which services across Australia can employ. It aims to identify and track support needs from marginalised populations who may be experiencing AVITH amid a range of co-occurring and complex needs (including disability).

From the existing body of ANROWS research, the following reports may be of use when understanding experiences of children with disability who also have had experiences of violence.

1. [“The PIPA project: Positive Interventions for Perpetrators of Adolescent violence in the home”](#) led by Elena Campbell from the Centre for Innovative Justice at RMIT University.

As noted above, this project explored legal responses to AVITH, including looking at the co-occurrence of AVITH with other issues and juvenile offending, and current responses and gaps in service delivery. It found that childhood trauma (including exposure to and experience of DFV) is a major contributor to adolescents’ use of violence in the home. It also found that families are experiencing adolescent violence with little service support, and services themselves are struggling to provide appropriate delivery models for adolescents. Importantly, the research revealed that there is a high prevalence of adolescents with psychosocial disability who experience a family violence legal response for AVITH, potentially increasing their vulnerability (and resulting in those young people missing out on appropriate supports).

2. [“Mothers and children with disability using early intervention services: Identifying and sharing promising practice”](#) led by Associate Professor kylie valentine from the University of New South Wales.

This research explored early intervention service responses for mothers and children with disability who are experiencing violence. It found that many mothers had difficulty in accessing services they were entitled to, and had to navigate multiple service systems. The report revealed that a holistic approach to safety and a focus on barriers to support (rather than impairment) is key to responding to the needs of families where either mothers or children have disability. It identified principles of positive practice for services working with mothers and children with disability who are experiencing violence: timely responses and scaffolded planning, personalised and flexible support, building and sustaining local sector relationships, improving service coordination, and building cultural safety with Aboriginal families. The report also found that challenges to effective practice in early intervention included workers having a lack of confidence in speaking about disability, strained sector and inter-sector capacity, time-limited support, and gaps in services and systems.

### ***Supporting families with multiple and complex needs***

While ANROWS supports the notion of working better with families with multiple and complex needs, we also would emphasise the need to specifically partner with victims and survivors of DFV. With the rate

of co-occurrence of Australian children experiencing sexual abuse and being exposed to domestic violence estimated at 40 per cent (Bedi & Goddard, 2007 as cited in Richards, 2011), there is demonstrated need for this inclusion. Contemporary ANROWS research into DFV highlights the importance of “pivoting to the perpetrator” to maintain the onus of responsibility for abuse on the perpetrator of violence (Mandel, 2014 as cited in Healey et al., 2018). By partnering with the non-offending parent and strengthening the (usually mother–child) bond, outcomes for the child are also improved, as practitioners “found that in pivoting to the perpetrator and partnering with women, the children’s needs were brought into view through the focus on parenting” (Healey et al., 2018, p. 14).

Australian research into family law cases highlights the impact on children when systems fail to partner with victims and survivors. Parental alienation, which has been widely discredited in a clinical sense, continues to be raised by fathers as a “defence” to child sexual abuse allegations (Death et al., 2019). The raising of these issues is gendered, with “mothers primarily being constructed as manipulative, mentally unwell, suffering from delusions, and ultimately harming their children with the intent of punishing the other parent” (Death et al., 2019, p. 2). Other Australian research has also found that our family law system does not respond as well as it should to child sexual abuse, and sometimes accepts perpetrator-generated narratives of mental illness to explain allegations, rather than investigating them (McInnes, 2013). The raising of mental health in Family Court matters is also gendered, with it being given as the “reason limiting child contact with mothers in 30% of such cases, but only in 2% of cases limiting fathers”, which does not align with general mental health prevalence (McInnes, 2014 as cited in Death et al., 2019, p. 7). Unsurprisingly, both women and some of the professionals they had contact with reported they were fearful to raise allegations of child abuse in the Family Court system lest they be seen as an “alienating” parent (Kaspiew et al., 2017). In achieving the successful reduction of the risk, extent and impact of child sexual abuse and related harms in Australia, victims and survivors of DFV are important stakeholders.

**Recommendation 6:** Draw upon the expertise and evidence base (both existing and underway) at Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety when addressing the priority groups outlined in the successor plan to the *National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009–2020*.

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** Indicate clearly how the successor plans to the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* and the *National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009–2020* interact with each other to ensure that work and resources are not duplicated or siloed across different sectors.

**Recommendation 2:** Prevent and reduce the intergenerational impact of childhood trauma via pre- and postnatal care and screening for abuse and violence, trauma-informed parental and family support programs, and early intervention for children exposed to trauma.

**Recommendation 3:** Ensure that the needs of children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours are specifically addressed in this National Framework.

**Recommendation 4:** Increased attention and focus is given to strategies, programs and resources that recognise adults as parents and enhance visibility of their children in DFV, alcohol and other drugs, and mental health interventions.

**Recommendation 5:** Use the insights from *Working across sectors to meet the needs of clients experiencing domestic and family violence (2020b)* to enhance collaboration and integration across the service system as it relates to children with experiences of family violence.

**Recommendation 6:** Draw upon the expertise and evidence base (both existing and underway) at Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety when addressing the priority groups outlined in the successor plan to the *National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009–2020*.



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