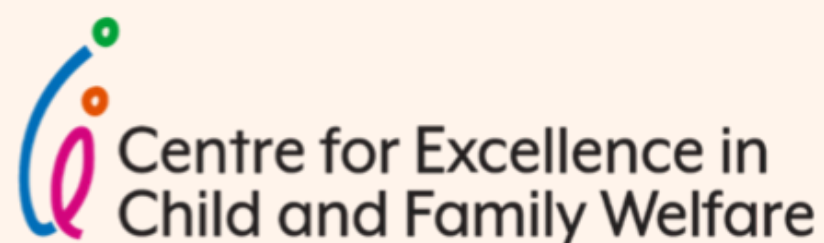


CHILDREN'S VOICES FOR CHANGE

A rights-based approach to understanding and implementing effective supports for children and pre-adolescents as victim-survivors of family violence



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ABOUT THE PROJECT

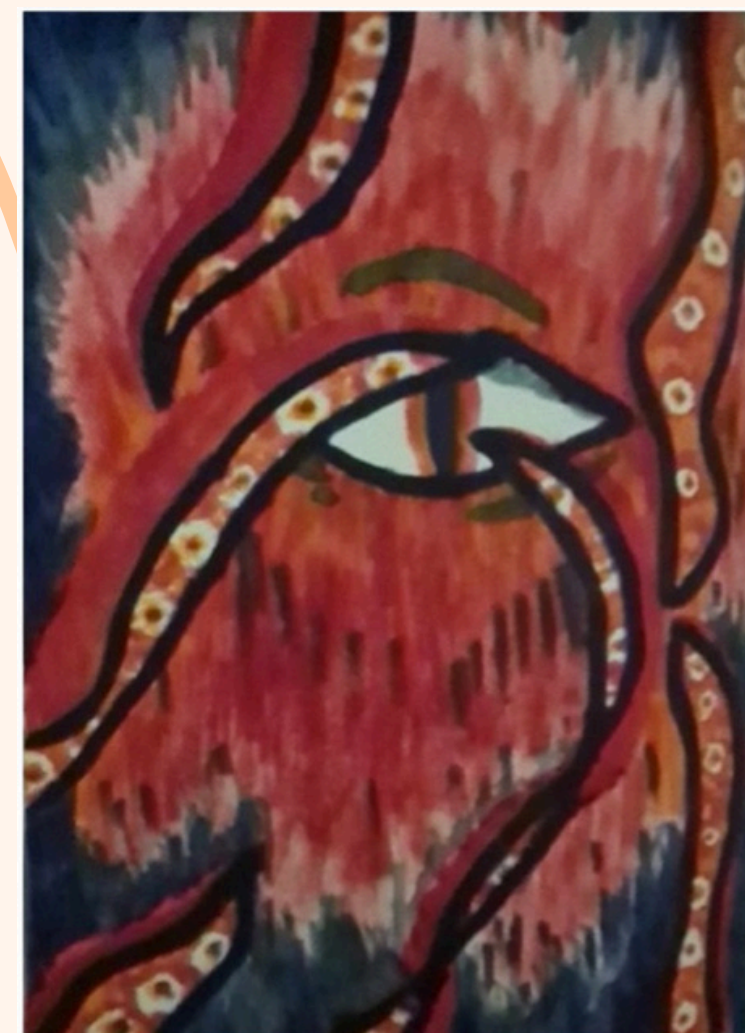
The Children's Voices for Change project aimed to better understand the needs of children and young people aged up to 13 years in Victoria who have experienced family violence as victim-survivors in their own right.

The project engaged with **children and young people as family violence experts by experience**: as research participants, co-researchers and Youth Advisory Group members.

This research is important because children and young people who have experienced family violence are often **invisible** in the service landscape (McCann et al 2023). They are the **'forgotten' and 'silent' victims** (State of Victoria 2016: 129). There is now **a greater focus in Australian policy, research and practice on elevating the voices and lived experiences of children and young people** in family violence services and systems (DSS 2022; FSV 2020; Fitz-Gibbon et al. 2023; Robinson et al. 2023).

But there are still gaps in understanding:

- children's **distinct and unique** response and recovery needs;
- whether **services are meeting children's needs** as victim survivors in their own right;
- how to **meaningfully engage** with children to centralise their voices, views and experiences;
- how to embed **rights-based, child-centred and trauma-informed approaches** into practice.



RESEARCH APPROACH

The project used a **children's rights-based approach**, informed by the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. This approach emphasises the strengths of each child, and the need for all adults to develop the capacity to meet their obligations to respect, protect and uphold children's rights. There were four stages of the project:

01.

A **review of existing research and an analysis of data from The Orange Door** to understand children's pathways into and through Victoria's family violence service system.

02.

A **survey of practitioners** in Victoria who provide support services to children who have experienced family violence.

03.

An **online, interactive activity with children and young people** who have accessed family violence support services in Victoria.

04.

Workshops with children and young people and practitioners **to co-create and test a Children's Feedback Tool**.

LEARNING FROM OUR RESEARCH JOURNEY

These are the project **Youth Advisory Group's three guiding principles** for collaborative research with children and young people who have experienced family violence:

Set the agenda together

Research projects about children and young people should have those with **lived experience involved at all stages**, from the initial idea and ethics processes, to interpreting and presenting the data. **It is important for researchers to use curiosity as a tool to learn from our experiences and perspectives.**

Create and hold space and time

Children and young people who have experienced family violence have a lot of **weight on their shoulders**. We can be juggling school, work, advocacy, and navigating our experiences of trauma. It can also be difficult revisiting old memories. This means we may need to have some time and space away from the project. Create and hold space and time for us to be involved in whatever capacity works best. **Give us the flexibility to step in and out as we need. Prioritising our safety and wellbeing means research will take longer.**

Side by side

Most of the spaces we enter as young advocates are not accessible. Being in the space with other children and young people with lived experience makes us feel safer and more comfortable to share our knowledge and expertise. **When we share stories of our lived experience, they resonate with other young advocates: we understand each other. There needs to be the readiness among adults to make spaces more accessible and youth-friendly.** This includes not expecting young people to have the same background knowledge and context about the system; and ensuring that we can show up just as we are.

KEY FINDINGS



1.

There is no ‘one size fits all’ for supporting children who have experienced family violence.

Services must understand what each child needs to help them feel safe and well, which might be different to the needs of their parent/carer and siblings. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with disability, LGBTIQ+ children, and children from migrant and refugee communities, often face additional barriers to accessing family violence supports and having their needs met.

2.

Children need connection, trust and loving relationships with family, friends and pets, to help them heal from their experiences of family violence.

Children also want to make sure that they and their family members are safe and healthy, and that they have stable housing and enough money to meet their basic needs.

3.

Building and maintaining trust between the child and their practitioner is very important.

Children and young people described services breaching their trust by disclosing information to others, by not understanding their experiences of family violence, and by police misidentifying the person using violence. For practitioners, children’s fear or lack of trust were sometimes barriers to engagement, which affected services’ ability to provide effective support.

4.

Asking children for feedback about their service experience is not common practice in Victoria.

Where children do provide feedback, it is often through an adult, such as the child’s parent/carer or case worker, usually at the end of the service interaction.

5.

There are still many barriers to supporting children as victim-survivors of family violence in their own right:

- Long wait times to access services, not enough staff, a lack of specialised programs for children, short case management periods, and practitioners without enough skills and confidence to work with children.
- The need for parental consent to engage with services, which can be used by the person using violence to stop children from accessing support.
- Family law parenting orders make it hard for services to help children or put children at risk of harm.
- Police responses to family violence incidents are experienced by children negatively.
- Not enough data about how children engage with The Orange Door network.
- Services that do not always collaborate and communicate well.

6.

Services and systems must listen to, hear and understand children. Children who have experienced family violence *can* identify and share what they need to feel safe and well.

“Start listening. Don’t think you know. You can’t see us as victims in our own right unless you actually listen.”

Molly, 11

RECOMMENDATIONS

1.

The Victorian Government should create a **Family Violence Youth Advisory Group**, to provide ongoing advice and guidance on laws and policies relevant to children and young people's distinct family violence response and recovery needs.

2.

The Victorian Government should invest in **specialised and targeted programs and services for children** who have experienced family violence, including therapy, group work and specific programs for children with diverse identities, backgrounds and needs.

3.

The Victorian Government should fund services and programs to offer **longer support periods for children**, so practitioners can work in a flexible and child-led way that meets each child's short-term and long-term needs.

4.

The Victorian Government should continue to invest in **capability-building initiatives for professionals working with children and young people** who have experienced family violence, in specialist family violence services, child and family services, child protection, schools, hospitals, health and legal services.

5.

Family Safety Victoria should **improve how The Orange Door sites collect data about children**.

6.

The Victorian Government should continue to invest in initiatives to make sure that **Aboriginal victim-survivors of family violence feel safe to engage with support services**.

7.

The Victorian Government should develop and deliver **public awareness campaigns and resources for the community**, available in a range of formats and languages, to improve understandings of family violence and its impacts on children and young people.

8.

The Victorian Government should provide **specific brokerage** for children and young people and continue to invest in the **Personal Safety Initiative and Flexible Support Packages (FSP)**.

9.

The Victorian Government should establish and fund **targeted, safe and age-appropriate crisis accommodation options for children**. Children's views should be listened to and taken into account in decisions about supporting them to **stay in or return safely to their home** where suitable and appropriate.

10.

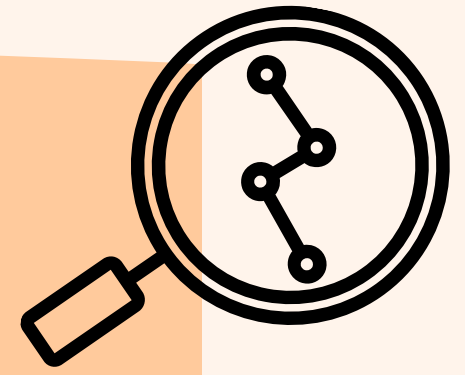
Victoria Police should invest in **practical resources** for responding to family violence incidents involving children.

11.

The Federal Government should **change the Family Law Act 1975 (Cth) to give all children a right to express their views and be heard in parenting matters**.

PRACTITIONER INSIGHTS

SURVEY SNAPSHOT



- **320 practitioners** responded
- **31.7%** (101/319) worked for a **specialist family violence service**
- **64.2%** (201/313) worked mainly in **metropolitan Melbourne**
- **61.3%** (195/318) said their **service supported children** aged up to 13 years who have experienced family violence **'very often'** (75-99% of the time)
- **38.4%** (123/320) said their **service had programs specifically designed for children**
- **54.4%** (173/318) **had done training in the past 12 months** to work with children aged up to 13 years who have experienced family violence
- **45.7%** (144/315) indicated that their **service specifically asks children for feedback** about their service experience



WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

Kids are amazing and actually many of them have the answers to how we change the adult-centric systems, values and attitudes. We just have to ensure there are spaces for them to tell us and show us.

Practitioner 252

Working with 10- to 13-year-olds (the tweenies) as an individual cohort with specific development needs is missing from the sector. This age group is more often than not 'sponges'. Providing support at a younger age would be true prevention and intervention work.

Practitioner 120

The impacts of childhood trauma have far-reaching and long-lasting effects and almost without exception the parents that end up in the service system have been victims in their own right as children. The importance of having services in place to work with traumatised children cannot be overstated.

Practitioner 228

We need to stop assuming that we know what is best for children and hear what they are saying to us. And we also need to stop thinking that children lie about being victim survivors. Believe children.

Practitioner 116

The only way we can scaffold healing and recovery is by ensuring we have specialised child mental health supports and services that are easily accessible. Wait lists and intakes are too long and discouraging and many barriers exist for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities including transport, service distrust, financial burdens, drug and alcohol issues, homelessness and family reprisal. Our specialised family violence support services are overwhelmed and our children bear the cost.

Practitioner 256

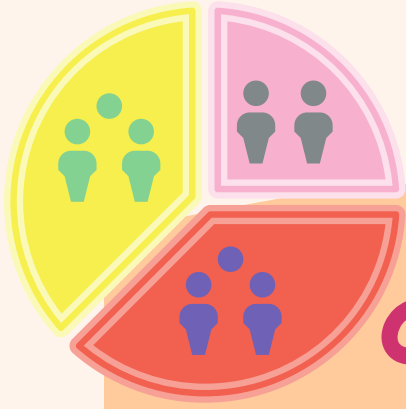
Children need more voice in the family court system and choice in seeking support options.

Practitioner 23

More staff, more hours, more money.

Practitioner 129

CHILDREN'S NEEDS & EXPERIENCES



CHILDREN'S ACTIVITY SNAPSHOT

- **23 children and young people** took part
- They were **between 7 and 25 years old**
- **11** identified as **female**; **8** identified as **male**; **3** identified as **non-binary**
- 1 identified as **Aboriginal**
- 1 sometimes spoke a **language other than English** at home
- **56.5%** (13/23) disclosed having a **disability, chronic health condition or mental health condition**
- **73.9%** (17/23) **lived with their mother, or with their mother and siblings**
- Some **described the situation** that led to them accessing support

My little brother's dad put my mum in hospital. Malik, 12

When my dad gave me a black eye and put my mum in hospital by strangling her. Darius, 12

When I was 11 and my dad put me and mum in hospital. Arthur, 15

Dad found out where we lived and tried to break in and hurt us again. Tariq, 11

My dad still caused problems. Amara, 7

RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTION

Spending more time with my mum. Finding more friends that I relate to and trust. Being around people I trust. Angelica, 10



Nourishing my body and eating well. Getting enough sleep. Getting outside. Being active. Calming myself when exposed to triggers. Gabby, 18

HEALTH & WELLBEING

FINANCIAL SECURITY & HOUSING STABILITY



Mum having a job. Oliver, 15

Being rich so that we can buy a house so that we never have to move. Sam, 8

Living in one house, without fear. Darren 13

PHYSICAL SECURITY

Locks on doors. Lights at night. Jamie, 21



A pet guard dog. Amara, 7

For my abuser to be locked away. Having a different car. Hannah, 16

WHAT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE NEED TO FEEL SAFE AND WELL

SUPPORT NETWORKS

Help with school attendance. Zahra, 16

Having mental health support. Anita, 17

HOBBIES & ACTIVITIES

Access to art classes and supplies. Charlie, 12

A lead in the musical theatre production. Zahra, 16

Basketball. Matthew, 13



Eating vanilla wafers. Sleeping with a heat pack. Lisa, 11

Oversized clothes. Jamie, 21

My teddy. Kevin, 16

PHYSICAL POSSESSIONS & COMFORT

AUTONOMY & CHOICE

Going to the choice of school I want that makes me feel safe. Charlie, 12

People supporting me with my choices. Angelica 10



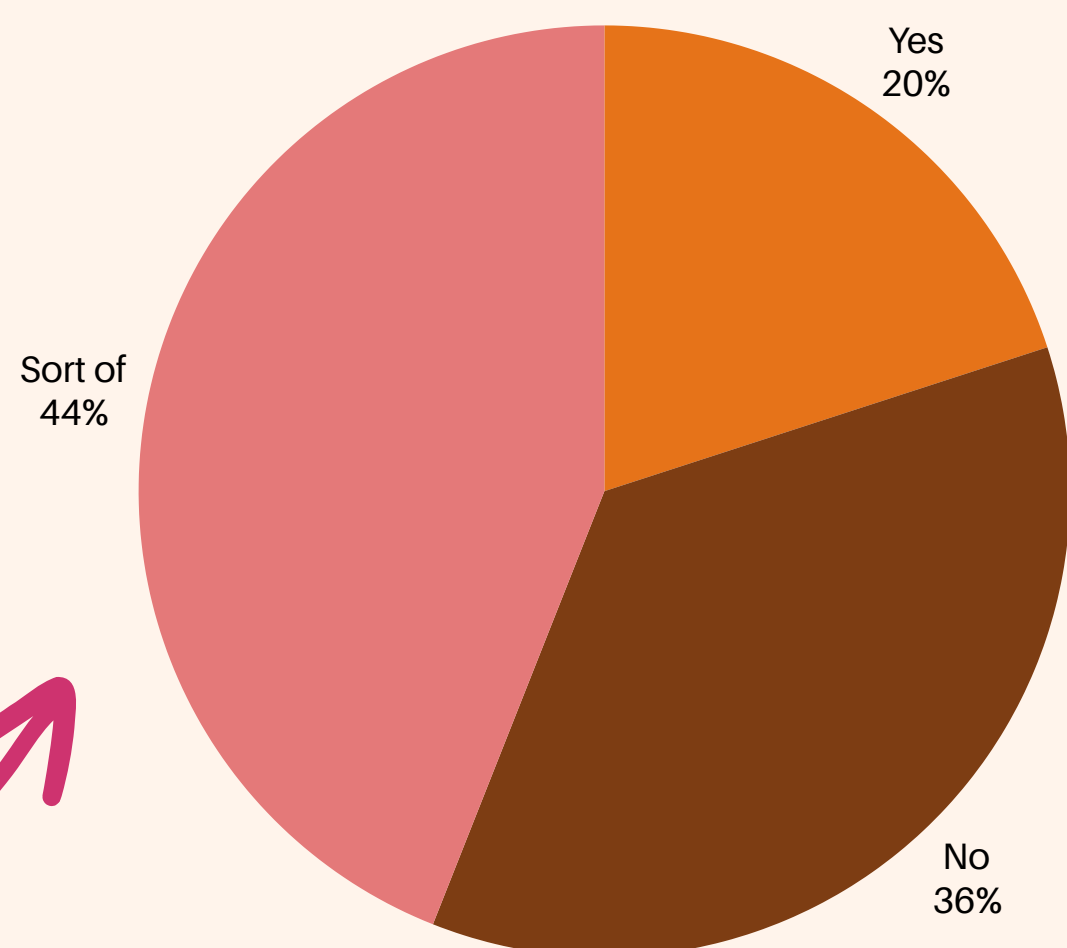
CHILDREN'S NEEDS & EXPERIENCES

SUPPORT SERVICES ACCESSED

Children and young people accessed a total of 21 different services for family violence support, including specialist family violence services, health, housing and homelessness, legal, police, child and family, child protection, and mental health services. The most common were The Orange Door (n=5), police (n=5) and counselling (n=4).

Most children and young people did not receive all the support they needed.

Did you **get what you needed** from the support service?



WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

At the moment the people who do this work don't know how to help kids in my generation who are facing stuff they haven't had to deal with at our age.

Charlie, 12

I was an extension of my mum to literally everyone from police to services. To be honest the services can't really help us or see us as victims in our own right until the system changes and police and courts change.

Oliver, 15

They said they understand and are going to help us stay safe but he got out of jail and found us and we had to move again. Why do we have to always move when he is the one that hurts us all the time?

Darius, 12

Family violence at a young age impacts kids for the rest of their lives if they aren't given the opportunity to grow out of it and overcome it. People like myself who have had to stop working, out of fear, have received no financial support.

Anita, 17

The Orange Door didn't speak to me directly. They spoke to mum. They didn't speak to Kids Helpline. They didn't work together. They didn't speak to my school who were really unprepared. All services need to speak to each other. Services need to speak to children about what's happening.

Darren, 13

They need to actually listen and not assume. Stop saying police are good. Also don't say that we can trust them because that's what every bad person says right before they prove that you can't trust them. It's the biggest red flag ever. We just want to be safe. We don't want police and child protection ... getting clap sticks when they find out you are Aboriginal when your mob don't even use clap sticks or do dot painting. Services need to stop talking and telling me what I mean, when that's not what I said. They need to get it that police and child protection aren't good and in fact, scare us.

Molly, 11

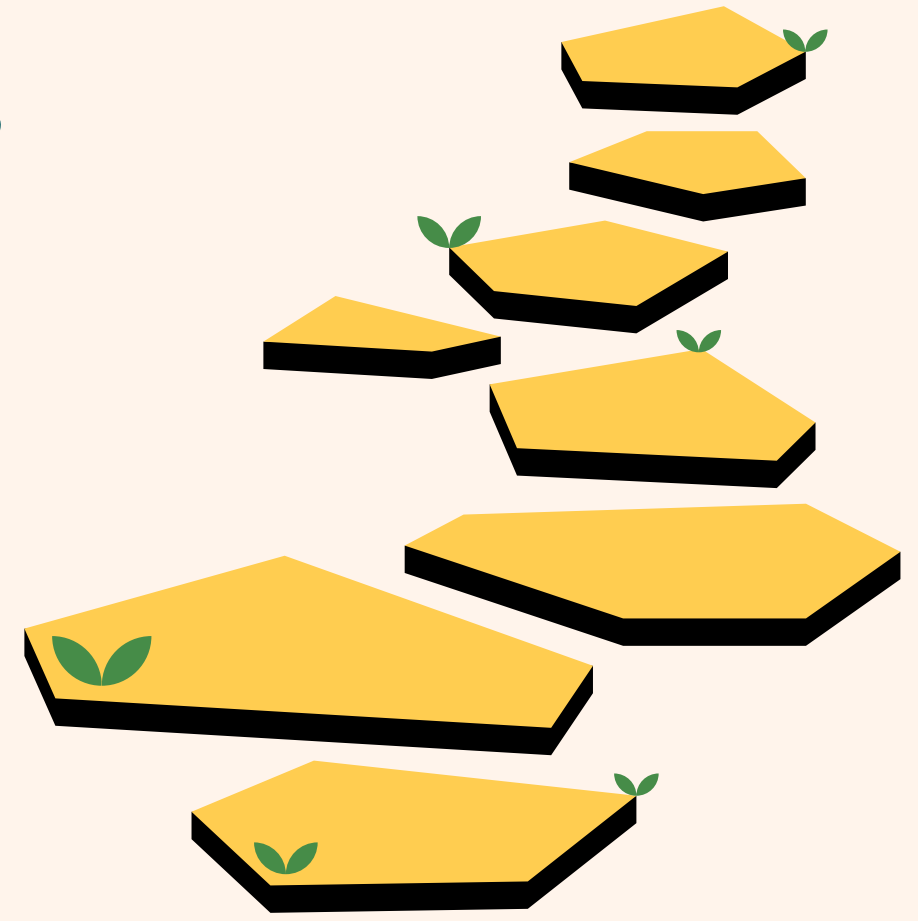
Listen to kids because we don't make this stuff up. If teachers and schools know more about family violence, they can help kids better.

Arthur, 15

I was scared and didn't feel I had much of a voice. Being patient with kids who are victims of family violence is necessary because it took me years to find the courage to talk about my past and my feelings.

Gabby, 18

THE 'CHANGE' GUIDING PRINCIPLES



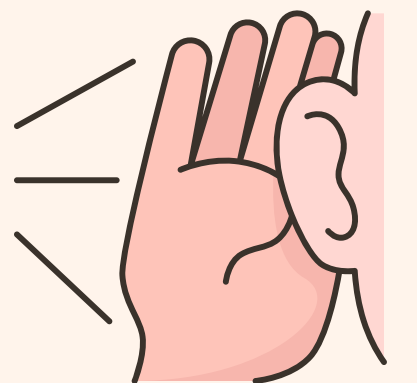
C reate space and time

Children need **welcoming and inclusive spaces** to feel safe and comfortable in a service support environment. Devote **time** at the beginning of service engagement **for the child and the practitioner to get to know each other**, and for the practitioner to **understand** how each child prefers to engage. There should also be space and time for the child to **ask questions** and provide **meaningful feedback throughout** their service engagement.



H ear the child

Listening to and hearing the child form a vital part of the process of **children's participation**. **Actively** listen, so that the child feels that their voice, views and experiences are being heard and understood. Children who are victim-survivors of family violence **may not wish to speak directly** about their experiences. 'Hearing the child' is understood **expansively** to include identifying children's expressed views and wishes via play, facial expressions, body language and art.



A ct on feedback

For a child to feel heard, adults must be responsive to the **particular type of support** the child needs, which may be **action-oriented**. Be **accountable** to the child, by clearly communicating how their feedback will be used and actioned, in relation to the child themselves and for ongoing service improvement.



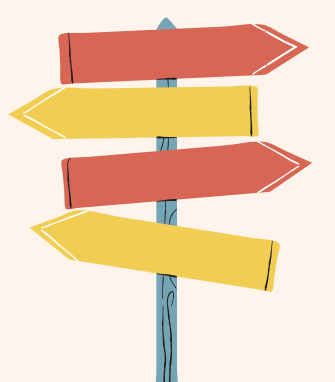
N avigate trust

Establish and maintain trust by **listening to and understanding** the child and their experiences, by being **transparent about the boundaries of the support** that the service can provide, by **following through on support promised**, and by being **clear** about what will be done with **information they share**, including mandatory reporting obligations and child information sharing schemes.



G ive choice and agency

Children's **loss of agency and control** arising from family violence makes **choices in service engagement** particularly important. Give the child **meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions** about their family violence response and recovery needs, consistently with their age and evolving capacities, and with appropriate guidance and direction.



E xplain enough and ensure understanding

Give the child **accessible information** about the **nature, purpose and scope** of the support being provided to them. This information should be appropriate for the child's **age and stage of development**, and accommodate their **communication preferences and needs**. Ensure that the child **understands** this information and can **ask questions to clarify** their understanding.



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