

Submission to the Safe and Supported Second Action Plans 2027–2031

To: Australian Government Department of Social Services

Consultation: *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031 – Second Action Plans 2027–2031*

The Centre for Relational Care (CRC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation informing the Safe and Supported Second Action Plans for 2027–2031.

CRC is an independent, not-for-profit advocacy body working to transform Australia's child protection and out-of-home care systems towards relational models of care. Our work is guided by lived experience and grounded in what evidence, neuroscience and frontline practice show: children do best when relationships are at the centre of their care. We call the alternative we are developing a Child Connection System.

Our response supports the priorities proposed in the Discussion Paper and identifies one area we believe should be made more explicit across the Second Action Plans: connection.

Our main message

Connection should be an explicit outcome and organising principle of the Second Action Plans.

Children need safe and enduring relationships with family, kin, culture, community, carers, friends, schools and other trusted adults. Strengthening those relationships should be one of the central tests of whether reform under Safe and Supported is improving children's lives.

This is particularly important for children and young people who come into contact with child protection. Support should reach families before crisis. Where statutory intervention is necessary, the system should actively protect and strengthen the relationships around a child rather than allowing care arrangements, service boundaries or administrative processes to unnecessarily sever them.

This approach is consistent with [Supporting Children and Families to Flourish](#), developed in 2024 by the Australian Public Policy Institute (APPI, formerly the James Martin Institute for Public Policy) in collaboration with CRC and the NSW Department of Communities and Justice. The report argues for a relational approach that emphasises trust, human connection, family agency and holistic wellbeing, and identifies 11 opportunities for system reform.

Five priorities CRC would like to see reflected across the Plans

- Make **connection** an explicit outcome of the national framework.
- Support the development of an accessible, place-based, hub-style early help system for families, including a genuine no-wrong-door pathway.
- Strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, delegated authority, community control and cultural connection.
- Create workforce and commissioning conditions that give practitioners time, continuity and authority to work relationally.
- Measure what matters most: the quality and continuity of the relationships children and families experience.

Response to the six consultation questions

Q1. What would make the biggest difference in helping children, young people and families get the right support early, before concerns escalate?

The biggest shift would be to make help and support genuinely available before a family reaches the threshold for statutory child protection. Australia has universal services and statutory child protection, but many families with chronic, multiple or escalating needs sit between the two. Light-touch services are often insufficient or unavailable, while more intensive help can be difficult to access until concerns have escalated.

We need a system where parents and families can seek practical, relational support without fear that asking for help will automatically lead to investigation or removal. The Second Action Plans can help turn this into a more consistent national direction by making early support a clear, consistent focus. This is consistent with the public health approach proposed in *Supporting Children and Families to Flourish*: families should be able to access support across their journey, including relational early help and voluntary, place-based support, rather than waiting until they reach crisis.

Ideally, early support includes:

A genuine no-wrong-door approach. Families should be able to approach a trusted community, health, education, disability, housing or family service and be helped and enabled to reach the support they need, rather than being required to navigate multiple disconnected systems.

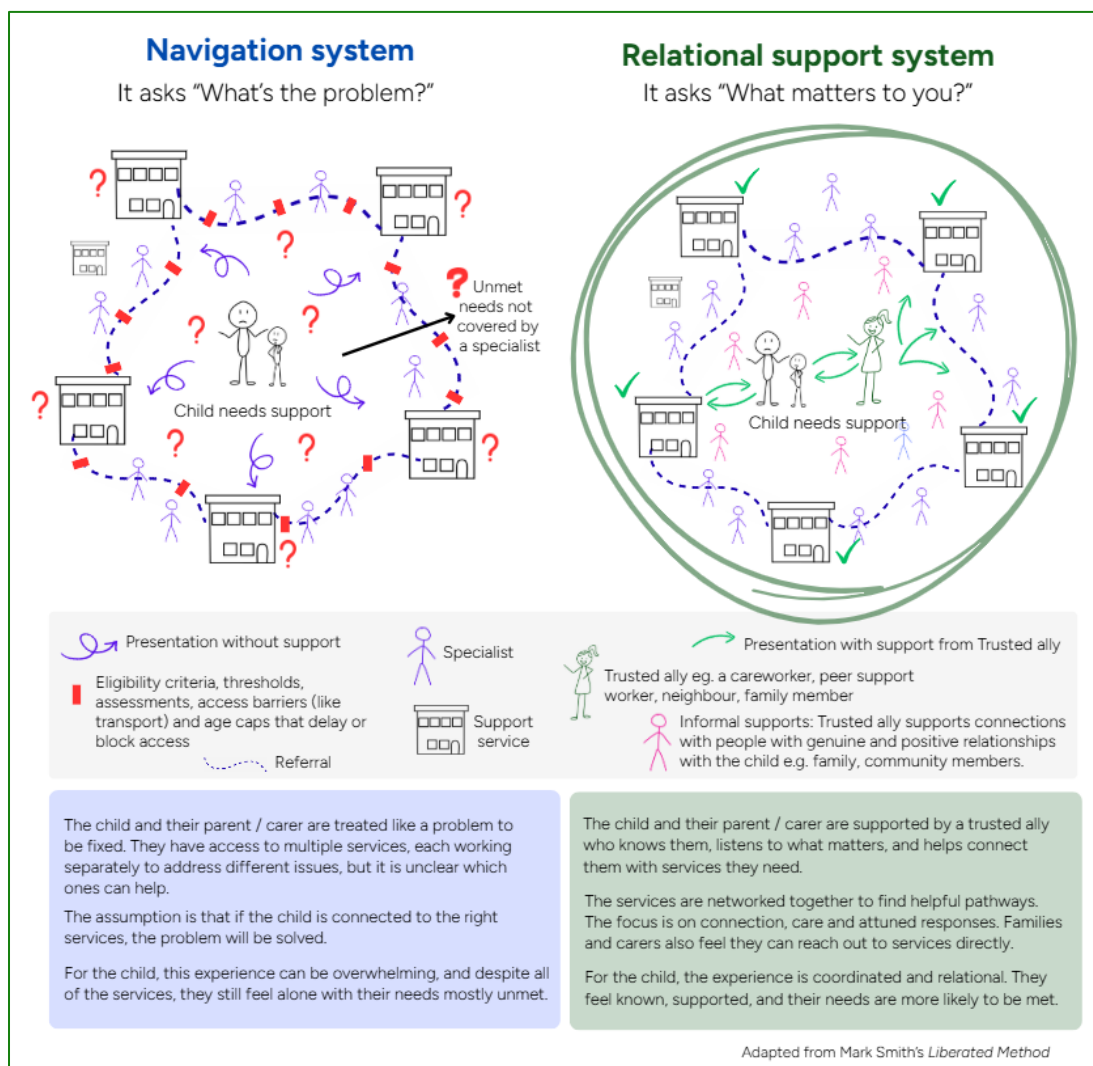
Place-based family help. Child and Family Hubs or equivalent local services can provide a practical foundation, building on existing community infrastructure where available. Australia already has a substantial network of hubs bringing health, education and social supports together. The important design question is not simply co-location of services. Families also need outreach and navigation – this, and the coordination and strong relationships between services, need to be funded as core work. This aligns with *Supporting Children and Families to Flourish*, which identifies investment in place-based, community-driven supports as one of the key opportunities for building a more relational system.

Flexible practical assistance. Local services should have access to flexible brokerage funding that allows practitioners to respond quickly to practical barriers such as transport, food, utilities, school needs and other immediate pressures. Small amounts of discretionary funding, available without lengthy approval processes, can remove barriers to families engaging with support and can prevent problems from becoming more difficult to resolve. The practitioner who knows the family should have reasonable discretion to use this funding in response to what the family identifies as most important.

Differential responses. CRC supports further exploration of approaches that distinguish between circumstances requiring statutory investigation and those where children can be kept safe through voluntary family and community support. The Commonwealth could assist through national principles, evidence sharing and support for jurisdictional testing and evaluation of differential response models.

Longer-term and more relational commissioning. Funding arrangements should give organisations the time and flexibility to build trusted relationships, work with other local organisations, and respond to what families actually need. Short funding cycles, competition and narrowly defined service outputs make this difficult. This aligns with the Centre for Policy Development's 2026 report [*Doing What Works: Social services commissioning that delivers for communities*](#), which calls for commissioning approaches that are more collaborative, relational, place-based and outcomes-focused, with trust and shared learning at their core. CPD also argues for greater funding certainty over longer timeframes, alongside the capabilities and mindsets within government needed to support collaborative and relational ways of working.

A consistent relationship ally. Families experiencing multiple needs should have access to a consistent, trusted person who can walk alongside them over time. CRC has adapted Mark Smith's *Liberated Method* to child protection and human services systems to illustrate how this differs from conventional service navigation. The role starts with understanding what matters to the child and family, maintains continuity as circumstances change, and brings specialist expertise around the relationship when it is needed. Families should not have to repeatedly retell their story or start again each time responsibility moves between services. *See diagram below:*



Q2. How can child and family services work better together with health, education, disability, housing, justice and family violence services to support children, young people and families?

Better coordination requires more than referral pathways. It requires shared responsibility for the child and family.

Families experiencing multiple pressures often encounter several systems at once. The boundaries between child protection, housing, health, disability, education and family violence services may make administrative sense to government and service providers but do not reflect how families experience their lives. These issues are often connected, and support needs to reflect that.

The Second Action Plans could establish a clearer shared commitment across systems: children and families should experience one connected system of support, even where responsibility and funding sit across different agencies and levels of government.

Supporting Children and Families to Flourish proposed a social compact as one way of establishing a shared commitment to children, families and communities. In practice, this means shared outcomes, clear local coordination arrangements, warm rather than passive referrals, appropriate information sharing, multidisciplinary responses and commissioning arrangements that support collaboration rather than provoking competition between organisations.

The Commonwealth can help by setting clear national expectations for cross-system coordination, while allowing local communities to determine how those expectations are put into practice in their own context.

Q3. What actions would best support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to stay safe, thrive and remain connected to family, community, culture and Country?

CRC supports the leadership of SNAICC - National Voice for our Children (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care), Aboriginal-led peak organisations such as AbSec and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities, in determining the actions required in this area.

The Second Action Plans should continue to strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination. *Supporting Children and Families to Flourish* similarly identifies First Nations agency and community control as a core design principle for a relational child and family system, particularly in family preservation and restoration.

Q4. What is needed to strengthen the child and family workforce so children, young people and families receive safe, high-quality and culturally responsive support?

The workforce needs the conditions to build relationships. Enabling time for relationships *is* the work.

Training and capability matter, but they will have limited impact if practitioners work within systems that do not give them the time, continuity, discretion or organisational support to use those capabilities.

One of the central opportunities identified in *Supporting Children and Families to Flourish* is an empowered workforce with the right time and incentives to engage in relational practice. This means giving workers and carers space to use their creativity, judgement and skills to build trust with children and families.

Workforce initiatives need to look beyond training and consider caseloads, continuity, supervision, administrative burden, decision-making authority and the amount of time workers are actually able to spend with children and families.

Q5. Children and young people have told us they want connected services that are designed for them and recognise them as individuals with their own experiences, views and support needs. What guidance, resources, practice tools or other supports would help organisations better implement approaches that strengthen children and young people's safety, wellbeing, voice and participation?

Participation needs to go beyond asking children and young people for their views. Organisations need to understand the child as a person with relationships, respond to what the child tells them, and protect the connections that matter to them.

Useful national practice resources could include:

- relationship mapping tools used alongside children and young people to identify who matters to them, who they trust, who knows them well and which relationships could endure over time
- practice guidance on maintaining sibling, family, kin, cultural, school, community and trusted-adult relationships when children enter care or move between placements
- guidance to help practitioners actively identify and strengthen a child's network of safe and supportive relationships, which may include relatives overseas
- clear feedback loops so children and young people know what happened as a result of expressing their views
- tools that help organisations distinguish genuine relational safety from procedural compliance, and support practitioners to exercise professional judgement transparently.

As an example, CRC's Youth Advisory Group helped develop [Am I being REAL?](#) a simple reflective prompt for people working with children and families. It encourages practitioners to reflect on four elements of relational practice: Relationships, Empathy, Attitude and Language, and to consider how their everyday interactions are experienced by children and young people.

CRC's youth-led work has also reinforced the value of a social compact with children and young people: young people should know what they can expect from systems and what reciprocity, honesty, continuity and respect look like in everyday practice.

Voice and participation should lead to children having greater influence over their experience and show that the relationships and connections that matter to them are recognised and supported as an integral part of care.

Q6. What would help governments, services and communities understand whether the Second Action Plans are improving outcomes for children, young people and families?

CRC has consistently argued that systems should measure what matters to children and families, rather than relying primarily on activity, compliance and service volume.

Supporting Children and Families to Flourish makes this argument. One of its 11 opportunities is measurement of the experience of families and carers, and one of its design principles is that direct feedback from children and families should be a part of judging success and learning from what is working.

A stronger national measurement methodology could include:

- children and young people's own reports of whether they feel safe, known, listened to, supported and connected
- relationship continuity, including the stability and quality of relationships with family, kin, carers, workers, mentors and other trusted adults
- whether a child has a reliable network of safe adults and whether that network is becoming stronger over time. CRC does not suggest a fixed number should be treated as a universal threshold.
- placement stability and the preservation of important relationships when placements change
- family, sibling, cultural and community connection, including connection to Country for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- access to early help, repeat referrals, unmet need and whether families received support before crisis
- reunification and restoration outcomes, including the support available before and after children return home
- outcomes for young people transitioning from care, including housing, education, employment, health, cultural connection and supportive relationships
- workforce continuity and the amount of practitioner time available for direct relational work
- qualitative evidence and lived experience alongside administrative data, so national reporting captures *how* support is experienced rather than only whether a service was delivered.

Reporting should be designed for learning, and evaluation should help systems and services adapt and improve. National measures should be capable of showing variation between jurisdictions and cohorts without reducing performance to simplistic league tables.

Thank you for considering this submission. CRC would welcome the opportunity to continue contributing to the practical development of relational approaches under Safe and Supported, including place-based early connection and help, relational commissioning, differential response, and approaches to measuring what matters to children and families.



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29 September 2026

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