

Domestic Violence and Children and Young People:

COAG National Summit on Reducing
Violence against Women

26 October 2016

About NCOSS

The NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) works with and for people experiencing poverty and disadvantage to see positive change in our communities.

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When rates of poverty and inequality are low, everyone in NSW benefits. With 80 years of knowledge and experience informing our vision, NCOSS is uniquely placed to bring together civil society to work with government and business to ensure communities in NSW are strong for everyone.

As the peak body for health and community services in NSW we support the sector to deliver innovative services that grow and evolve as needs and circumstances evolve.

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Introduction

The experience of domestic and family violence has significant short and long-term consequences for children and young people who are direct victims, bystanders or witnesses. We know that this experience can impact on their health, wellbeing, education, relationships and housing outcomes both now and later in life.

Yet children and young people are often forgotten or do not have a voice in shaping the responses and supports that should be targeted at reducing their experience of violence and mitigating the impact of this experience.

Here, we identify key initiatives at the State and National levels that would go towards providing appropriate support to children and young people who are victims of violence against women, and reducing the proportion of children exposed to domestic violence.

We need responses that support all children, everywhere. This requires:

- Raising awareness of the impact on children and young people and making it easier for children to disclose.
- Ensuring children and young people, including diverse groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse and children and young people with a disability are involved in the design and delivery of services that affect them.
- Child-centred responses for children caught up in domestic violence situations.
- Specialist services to support children and young people who have experienced domestic and family violence to heal and to rebuild their relationships.
- Development and testing of perpetrator programs that focus on children and fathering.

Children and young people also need targeted and age specific initiatives, including:

- *Children in the antenatal/ postnatal period:* The roll-out of sustained nurse home visiting programs for vulnerable families, with additional support provided to ensure families experiencing more complex issues, including where domestic violence is suspected or disclosed, receive an appropriate response.
- *Children age 3-5:* Initiatives to ensure all children, including children who are victims of domestic violence, have access to quality education. In NSW the Government should establish a \$250 million Early Childhood Education Investment Fund to pilot new approaches and fast-track this goal.
- *School age children:* All children should be able to access counselling through their school and children who have experienced domestic violence should be able to access specialised counselling services.
- *Young people:* Young people should be able to access youth specialist services and youth specialist homelessness services, including the Community of Schools and Services approach (The Geelong Project).

Key to these initiatives is involving children and young people directly in shaping the programs designed to support them. Only then can we work together to make real change to reduce the effect of domestic and family violence on children and young people and improve their life outcomes.

For all children, everywhere:

We need to raise awareness of the impact of domestic violence on children and young people and make it easier for children to disclose

- All people who are in regular contact with children and young people – such as early childhood educators, teachers and youth workers – should have a better understanding of the impact of domestic violence on children, and know what signs to look for. An education, training, and awareness-raising package is needed to achieve this. The universal service system should be better placed to support children to disclose or to access services that provide assistance, with workers equipped to be more understanding of a child or young person’s needs within a universal service.
- One avenue through which a child may disclose an experience of domestic or family violence is a school counsellor. We need to ensure all school children have easy access to a counsellor, and that these counsellors are well-equipped to identify domestic violence and work with children in a trauma-informed way.
- The COAG Advisory Panel recommended that all governments work with children and young people to design services that can best support them to report violence by building on successful initiatives from other areas as well as piloting new ones. They emphasised the need to develop and test technology-based services to support children to disclose domestic violence. In other areas, such as mental health, children have been shown to be more likely to disclose when using technology-based services.

We need child-centred responses for children caught up in domestic violence situations

- While some domestic violence services offer a level of support to children – such as counselling – they do not centre on the child’s needs and as such these needs often go unmet. Case coordination or case management for children who are victims of violence against women would facilitate a response that puts a child’s needs front and centre and gives children and young people agency over the support they receive. In NSW, a starting point would be to build capacity for child-centred approaches into the suite of responses available through the Local Coordination Points that are being rolled out across the State.

We need specialist services to support young people who have experienced domestic and family violence to heal, and to rebuild their relationships.

- We need to increase the availability of intensive services for children who have experienced domestic and family violence, including supporting the development of Aboriginal-led services and services for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. A good example of this type of service is Cara House in NSW. It offers children, adults and families therapy – providing a safe place to heal from the impacts of trauma and abuse. As well as a counselling service to address the impacts of domestic

violence for adults and children Cara House provides therapeutic and psycho-educational group programs, including on an outreach basis.

- As per the COAG Advisory Panel's recommendations, we should also develop and test perpetrator programs that focus on children and fathering, such as the Caring Dads program in Canada (**outline available page 8**)

Age specific initiatives:

Children in the antenatal / postnatal period:

Women are more likely to experience domestic violence, or for violence to escalate, during pregnancy. As such, the COAG Advisory Panel recommended that all Governments should prioritise the development, validation and implementation of perinatal domestic violence screening. We also need to ensure appropriate responses are available to women who disclose in this period.

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In NSW, while routine screening for domestic violence occurs, we now need to make sure women are provided with the support they need to protect both themselves and their unborn child. Possible responses include supported referrals into specialised domestic violence services, and nurse-home visiting programs such as the Maternal Early Childhood Sustained Home-visiting (MECSH) program which supports vulnerable families and can help link families to both domestic violence services and perpetrator programs.

We recommend the NSW Government roll-out *Sustaining NSW Families* sustained nurse home visits across the state with additional support provided to ensure families experiencing more complex issues, including where domestic and family violence is suspected or disclosed, receive an appropriate response (**outline available page 9**).

Children age 3-5:

The importance of quality early childhood education is well documented. With 90% of a child's brain development occurring in the first five years, this is a critical window of opportunity to maximise children's potential and improve their life outcomes. Yet too often the most vulnerable children miss out.

We recommend that the NSW Government establish a \$250 million Early Childhood Education Investment Fund to ensure vulnerable children access the full benefits of quality early education (**outline available page 10**). This Fund would be an opportunity to pilot new approaches that could then be replicated in other jurisdictions. Amongst other things, this fund could help equip early childhood services to support children who experience domestic violence including by:

- Strengthening linkages between domestic violence services and early childhood services and ensuring priority childcare places are available to women experiencing domestic violence.
- Supporting innovative models of service delivery – for example, Jarjum Centre Preschool, an Aboriginal service in Lismore, provides a homework club for the siblings of children in its preschool service ensuring they have a safe place to learn outside of school hours.

School age children:

As above, we need to ensure all teachers have a better understanding of the impact of domestic violence on children, and know what signs to look for. All children should also be able to access counselling through their school, with children who have experienced domestic and family violence able to access specialised counselling services such as those available through Cara House.

Young people:

Adolescence and emerging adulthood is a critical time for the development of skills for independence, coping mechanisms and attitudes to intimate relationships. As young people begin developing their own intimate relationships these are likely to be shaped by an experience of domestic and family violence and the model of relationships they have been exposed to in their homes. We need to:

- Recognise the critical role youth services play in supporting young people, providing a range of prevention and early intervention services, and acting as doorways to the broader service system. We must ensure these services are resourced appropriately.
- As above, we should ensure there is an understanding of the impact of domestic violence in all services accessed by young people and the capacity to provide a trauma-informed response – this includes youth services and youth specialist homelessness services.
- Recognise the linkages between a young person's experience of domestic and family violence and their risk of homelessness. We recommend, along with YFoundations – the peak body for youth homelessness in NSW, the state-wide roll-out of the Community of Schools and Services approach (also known as The Geelong Project) that would identify young people at risk of homelessness through population screening in schools, and provide a response commensurate with the level of risk (**outline available page 12**)

Caring Dads

Caring Dads is an intervention program for fathers (including biological, step, common-law) who have physically abused, emotionally abused or neglected their children, or exposed their children to domestic violence, or who are deemed to be at high-risk for these behaviours. Research indicates that men are more likely to engage with services to address their abusive behaviour if they think it will benefit their relationship with their children.

The program consists of a 17-week parenting intervention for fathers, systematic outreach to mothers to ensure safety and freedom from coercion, and ongoing, collaborative case management of fathers with referrers and with other professionals involved with men's families.

The group component of Caring Dads combines elements of parenting, fathering, battering and child protection practice to enhance the safety and well-being of children. Program principles emphasise the need to enhance men's motivation, promote child-centered fathering, address men's ability to engage in respectful, non-abusive co-parenting with children's mothers, recognise that children's experience of trauma will impact the rate of possible change, and work collaboratively with other service providers to ensure that children benefit (and are not unintentionally harmed) as a result of father's participation in intervention.

In addition, Caring Dads train communities in engaging, assessing and intervening with high-risk men and conduct research on how we can continue to improve their practice.

The model was developed in Canada and has since been adopted in a number of places in Europe and across the UK.

An evaluation of the program has found statistically and clinically significant change in risk mechanisms for maltreatment, specifically in fathers' over-reactivity to children's misbehavior, ability to co-parent with children's mothers, and their ability to prioritise their children's needs. In addition, the program is liked by fathers and their families, and has been shown to be meeting a significant need within and across communities.

Sustained nurse home visits

Nurse-led home visiting programs have a strong evidence base demonstrating they bring about substantial benefits for vulnerable children and their families. They can lead to better pregnancy outcomes, support mothers to breastfeed for longer and improve women's experience of motherhood. Ultimately, nurse home visits can improve a child's health and developmental outcomes and help cultivate a safe and nurturing home environment. ARACY's recent review of prevention and early intervention research identified nurse-led home visiting programs as one of the most promising strategies for improving child development outcomes; multiple studies demonstrate a return on investment of between 1.26 and 5.7.¹

Nurse-led home visiting programs such as the Maternal Early Childhood Sustained Home-Visiting (MECSH) program – which operates in a number of states – provide support to women with a range of risk factors including a history of domestic violence.

In NSW, the Ministry of Health funds the nurse-led home visiting program *Sustaining NSW Families* (initially based on the MECSH model) in eight sites across the state. While this program supports vulnerable families, most women experiencing domestic violence are excluded from the program.

We recommend *Sustaining NSW Families* nurse-led home visiting programs for vulnerable families with children age 0-2 be rolled out across the State, with additional support provided to ensure families experiencing more complex issues, including where domestic and family violence is suspected or disclosed, receive an appropriate response.

We note that KPMG's recent evaluation of *Sustaining NSW Families* found a strong case for state-wide rollout given the positive outcomes being achieved for children and parents, and with the program achieving an estimated net benefit per child of \$9,769.² Further, investing in the rollout of nurse-led home visiting programs would be in line with the *Third Action Plan* under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, which include a focus on 'Early intervention with a focus on the early years, particularly the first 1000 days for a child.'

¹ Fox, S., Southwell, A., Stafford, N., Goodhue, R., Jackson, D. and Smith, C. (2015). *Better Systems, Better Chances: A review of research and practice for prevention and early intervention*. Canberra: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), at 45.

² KPMG (2015) Evaluation of the Sustaining NSW Families Program: Final Report. Available at <http://www.kidsfamilies.health.nsw.gov.au/media/325389/kpmg-snf-report-final-30-jun-2015-.pdf>

Early Childhood Education Fund

Recommendation:

That the NSW Government establish a new, \$250 million Early Childhood Education Investment Fund to complement existing measures and ensure vulnerable children and young people are able to access the full benefits of quality early education. The fund could:

- Ensure early childhood services are equipped to support children who experience domestic violence including by strengthening linkages between domestic violence services and early childhood services and ensuring priority childcare places are available to women experiencing domestic violence.
- Acknowledge that the work needed to ensure children in vulnerable families successfully transition to preschool and maintain their enrolment begins at birth. The Fund would facilitate the development of pathways to preschool for vulnerable children.
- Incubate cross-sectoral partnerships – such as between any combination of early childhood services, children and family services, Aboriginal services, employment services, educational institutions, housing providers and employers – that will draw on diverse expertise in improving access to early education and achieving outcomes for vulnerable families across a range of domains.
- Build on innovative approaches to service delivery that have grown out of communities and that support children and their broader families.
- Provide financial support for strategies to improve Aboriginal access to early education, including growing the number of Aboriginal community-controlled services, resourcing an Aboriginal representative body, and developing a systematic and sustained approach to improving the cultural accessibility of mainstream services.
- Effect change in both preschool and long day care settings, noting that the majority of enrolments in early childhood education in NSW are in long day care (62%) but that the policy levers available to the NSW Government to improve the accessibility of these services are limited.
- Create an opportunity to build the evidence base in relation to access to early education by testing innovative strategies that could be replicated more broadly.

Example:

Nikinpa Aboriginal Child and Family Centre previously ran a transition to preschool program, acting as a cultural broker by connecting families who were on their waiting list with culturally appropriate mainstream services. This process helped establish shared expectations between families and services, increasing the number of Aboriginal families who were enrolling their children in early education and reducing the number of families who disconnected from the service system due to a bad experience.

Relationship to other funding measures:

The Fund would complement existing NSW Government initiatives including by:

- Improving the effectiveness of recurrent funding growth and achieving the cultural shift needed to meet enrolment targets for early education set by the Commonwealth and ensure the NSW Government does not continue to miss out on performance-based funding.
- Augmenting efforts to explore the application of social impact investment to early childhood education³ by providing a pathway through which a greater diversity of organisations – including smaller organisations with limited administrative capacity – could contribute to shared objectives through innovative models of service delivery. The Fund would also stimulate the market and build the skills, knowledge and capacity needed to improve take up and reach of future opportunities in social impact investment.
- We note that the Fund would not replace the need for adequate investment in recurrent funding for early childhood education and care. Rather, this Fund would improve the effectiveness of recurrent funding growth and ensure that growth led to outcomes, particularly NSW meeting its targets under the National Partnership Agreement. By bringing a much broader range of stakeholders together around a shared objective – ensuring vulnerable children are accessing quality early education – the Fund would assist in breaking a cycle of disadvantage, normalising in early education and establish new patterns of behaviour for families that are currently disconnected from the service system.

Operation of the Fund

The Fund will call on the market to put forward innovative, outcome focused or pay by results proposals that are outside the scope of existing funding streams, and facilitate access to early childhood education and increase the proportion of 4-year old enrolled in preschool programs for 600 hours per year.

Assessment criteria should encourage:

- A focus on achieving the National Partnership Agreement targets, including for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and for Indigenous children.
- The leveraging of existing resources and investment, both public and private.
- Cross-sectoral partnerships – such as between any combination of ECEC services, children and family services, Aboriginal services, employment services, educational institutions, housing providers and employers.
- Innovative approaches that both draw on and make a demonstrable contribution to the existing evidence base.
- Proposals that contribute to multiple policy goals.

We envisage that the Fund will deliver \$250 million in provider payments over a 10 year period. Payments will include a mix of outcomes based funding, pay by results contract payments and potentially more complex transactions. Similarly to the Social and Affordable Housing Fund, how the fund will operate, including governance arrangements, exclusions, support for Aboriginal organisations and other policy considerations, would be determined in consultation with stakeholders.

³ The NSW Government 2016 Statement of Opportunities identified early childhood education as one of three policy areas that could be assisted through social impact investment

The Geelong Project

The Geelong Project is a ‘community of schools and services’ response to young people at risk of homelessness. It uses a place-based integrated coalition of schools and youth agencies that engage in early intervention activities.

Defining characteristics of the Geelong Project include:

- Population screening for risk via a short survey completed by every secondary student with results matched against school identified at-risk students. At-risk students are then engaged with The Project via a follow-up screening interview.
- Tailored support, appropriate to the level of need:
 - Tier One – a non-case work response, either active monitoring by school staff, or a secondary consultation where a referral is made to another program or agency;
 - Tier Two – case work support, either a brief counselling-type of case work or case management; and
 - Tier Three – wrap-around case management for complex cases requiring the formal involvement of several agencies.
- An intentional approach to ‘collaboration’ involving inter-agency agreements. For example, in Geelong, an e- Wellbeing IT Platform is being built to facilitate the efficient tracking of young people at risk of homelessness within and between agencies.

In NSW two projects based on The Geelong Project have commenced in Ryde and the Northern Beaches in Sydney.