



2024 Budget Estimates

Keeping our Kids Safe: Rebalance Investment, Invest in the Evidence, and Address the Australian Child Maltreatment Study

About Fams

Fams is the NSW peak body supporting the child protection non-government early intervention and prevention sector. We advocate for improved policies and resources to support NSW children, families, and their communities.

Fams is committed to:

- Children and families receiving the support they need
- Evidence-informed and outcomes-based service delivery
- Government and sector accountability
- Influencing policy

Fams works collaboratively with:

- Government
- Policy and decision-makers
- Family and community services sector
- Non-government agencies and other peak bodies

Our Vision

Children thrive within safe, strong, supportive families and communities.

Our Mission

To support our sector to build capacity and capability and advocate for improved policies for children, families, communities, and services.

We contribute to population outcomes through:

- Building skills and knowledge in evidence-based frameworks to enable organisations to collect and use data to inform practice and collaborate to provide better results for clients, practitioners, and organisations; and
- Systematic policy and advocacy to inform and enable the government to implement solutions that support vulnerable children, families, and communities.

Introduction

Fams welcomes the NSW Government's efforts to address the chronic underfunding of the state's child protection system, including through recent investment in out-of-home care.

Investment in the acute end of our child protection system is critical, but if we want to stop vulnerable young people getting to the crisis end in the first place, we must invest earlier in children and families at risk. We must rebalance the system by increasing funding by 25 percent across early intervention and prevention.

Too often, vulnerable children, young people and their families in NSW are not provided with the support they need to stop them from falling into crisis.

The evidence proves that early intervention and prevention works and is instrumental in keeping NSW children safe. It's time we invest in a new evidence-based early intervention program across NSW, *smalltalk*.

The 2023 Australian Child Maltreatment Study found that child maltreatment is associated with severe mental health problems and behavioural harms, both in childhood and adulthood. We call on the NSW Government to establish a state-based government and sector taskforce to drive coordinated reform.

By working together to implement the common-sense reforms outlined in this paper, we can finally drive down the number of children at Risk of Significant Harm and ensure more young people across NSW get the best possible start in life.

We look forward to working with the NSW Government on making this a reality.

Summary of recommendations

1. Rebalance investment: Increase funding across the early intervention and prevention sector by 25 per cent.
2. Invest in the Evidence: Roll out an evidence-based early intervention program across NSW.
3. Address the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Establish a cross-government and sector taskforce.



Urgent need for change

The NSW child protection system is in crisis, leaving our communities most vulnerable children and young people at serious risk. There are significant gaps that need urgent attention.

Between 2018-2021, ROSH reports rose an average of 13.5 per cent, with some locations recording spikes of 20 per cent. Furthermore, over the 2015 -20 period, there was an increase of 40 per cent in reports regarding Aboriginal children. ⁱⁱ

Moving our child protection system from one of reporting when harm has occurred to one of supporting so harm never occurs is a moral, ethical, and budgetary imperative. This is how we break the cycle of intergenerational damage that is prolific across NSW.

The evidence is clear; prevention leads to better outcomes for children and families and there are already innovative, effective programs to deliver it: supporting families early, connecting them with their communities to prevent harm occurring.

While Fams acknowledges the vital investment directed towards the addressing the acute end of child protection, notably Out-of-Home Care (OOHC), it's imperative to recalibrate this focus by allocating more resources to prevention and early intervention services. **We need to stop harm from occurring in the first place.**

The Family is Culture review, which was undertaken by Professor Megan Davis, provides an important roadmap to address the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the OOHC care system. To date, progress has been slow, piecemeal and does not sufficiently engage with or empower Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and the workforce that supports Aboriginal children, families, and communities.

Increased government spending should prioritise Aboriginal children, young people, and families to access culturally safe and specific services. This strategic approach aims to curb the alarming rates of Aboriginal children entering OOHC by preventing harm and supporting families to be safe and together in ways that are culturally safe.

While the NSW Government has embarked on ambitious reforms in this space, the balance of investment is still heavily skewed towards the crisis end. The upcoming NSW Budget provides an opportunity to divert more funding to early intervention programs - make a once in a generation difference and stop catastrophe from happening in the first place.

The following recommendations set out how the NSW Government can turn this situation around.

1. Rebalance Investment

- Increase funding by 25 per cent across early intervention and prevention programs.

Recommendations

There is clear evidence and a need for more investment at the early intervention end of the child protection continuum.

Just as we do not fund hospital emergency wards at the expense of primary care investment, greater investment is needed to stop vulnerable children reaching the crisis end of the continuum.

Risk Of Significant Harm reports rose by 13.5 percent on average between 2018-21, up by more than 20 per cent in some locations. For First Nations children, over the 2015 -20 period over the, there was a 40 per cent increase.ⁱⁱⁱ

Despite this, our service system and funding continues to be focused on the crisis end, which means less pathways for families to connect with the right support early on and protect children that are regarded at risk of significant harm.

It is worth noting at this point that even a child protection notification doesn't guarantee access to services. In 2021, only a quarter of children reported at Risk Of Significant Harm were seen by a caseworker.^{iv}

Under current plans, the NSW government intends to redistribute existing funding in the early intervention and prevention programs to fund Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).

Whilst it is essential that ACCOs receive adequate funding, early intervention and prevention programs have not seen a funding increase in over 10 years.

A 25 per cent increase in funding prioritising ACCOs in early intervention and prevention will rebalance our response, and ultimately over time, reduce the quantum of funding needed at the crisis end.

This is all about rebalancing the system, sustaining and growing the early intervention response, and helps us to prevent children from falling into crisis.

ⁱ 2022-23 NSW Budget, Stronger Communities Cluster Outcomes Statement, Page 6

ⁱⁱ NSW Department of Community and Justice (2022), Annual Statistical Report 2020-21 - https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/dcj.statistics/viz/ASR2020-21summarydashboard_16481674309410/Coverpage

ⁱⁱⁱ NSW Department of Community and Justice (2022), Annual Statistical Report 2020-21 - https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/dcj.statistics/viz/ASR2020-21summarydashboard_16481674309410/Coverpage

^{iv} Impact Economics and Policy (2022), Ibid

2. Invest in the Evidence

- Rolling out an evidence-based early intervention program across NSW.

Recommendations

The first 2000 days of a child's life are critical determinants of physical, social, and emotional health¹. Experiences during these early years have deep and long-lasting effects on schooling and employment, lifelong health and risk of substance abuse and criminal behaviour.

The recently released 2023 [Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#)² found that child maltreatment remains widespread and is associated with severe mental health problems and behavioural harms, both in childhood and adulthood.

This emphasises the need for investment in evidence-based early intervention and prevention programs that support better parent-child relationships and reduce the likelihood of abuse.

The Parenting Research Centre (PRC) designed smalltalk, a set of evidence-based strategies for early childhood services, to build into their existing parent groups and home visit models. smalltalk shows parents how, by enhancing their home learning environment, they can help improve the long-term developmental outcomes of their children. smalltalk is a 'service enhancement' to accompany existing parent groups and programs working within already established and successful programs.

smalltalk is already being delivered successfully in 388 Supported Playgroups in Victoria, with a [three-year randomised trial](#) showing that participation in the program resulted in improvement in children's learning and developmental outcomes, lasting into school years:

- Children whose parents had participated showed better spelling and word recognition at age 7 years.

- Facilitators and parents reported that the program had a positive effect on parent knowledge, skills, and behaviour e.g. they were more verbally responsive to their child and engaged in more activities with their child at home.
- Parent satisfaction with the interventions was extremely high, with 95% of parents either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the program

smalltalk can be successfully adapted for specific communities, where knowledge is shared across entire kinship care systems including grandparents, aunties, and uncles. In Victoria, a co-designed, adapted version of the program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (smalltalk Big Yarns) was developed to increase accessibility and usability.

smalltalk is a low-cost, high-impact opportunity to support positive parenting change and improve early childhood outcomes. smalltalk could be rolled out across NSW and scaled up rapidly, as it is delivered as an enhancement to existing Supported Playgroups.

Requiring only a modest investment from the NSW Government, smalltalk would enable evidence-based parenting supports to be widely available and easily accessible in Department of Communities and Justice districts delivering Targeted Early Intervention funded supported playgroups.

A \$1.5 million investment over three years would deliver support for 433 playgroups across NSW, including 90 indigenous specific playgroups. This would benefit 13,000 families with increased confidence in their parenting and improved child developmental outcomes.

The sector is prepared to deliver this program. Over 160 Fams members have indicated their interest in running the program in the 2024-25 FY.

¹ NSW Government (2021) 'Brighter Beginnings', NSW Government, accessed 24 April 2023.

² The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: 2023 Brief Report - <https://www.acms.au/resources/the-prevalence-and-impact-of-child-maltreatment-in-australia-findings-from-the-australian-child-maltreatment-study-2023-brief-report/>

3. Address the Australian Child Maltreatment Study

- Establish a cross government and sector taskforce.

Recommendations

The 2023 Australian Child Maltreatment Study¹(ACMS) is the first national study worldwide to observe maltreatment experiences and associated health and social outcomes of all five forms of child maltreatment; physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and exposure to domestic violence. The study provides an understanding of the occurrence, context and impact of child abuse and neglect in Australia.

Child maltreatment is pervasive. Across the population of children who experienced maltreatment, the Study identified high prevalence of physical abuse (32.0%), sexual abuse (28.5%), emotional abuse (30.9%), and exposure to domestic violence (39.6%).

Child maltreatment is associated with severe mental health problems and behavioural harms, both in childhood and adulthood:

- Adults who experienced child maltreatment are 2.8 times more likely to have a mental health disorder than adults who have not experienced child maltreatment.
- People who experienced child maltreatment were 4.5 times more likely to have attempted suicide and 3.9 times more likely to have self-harmed.
- Emotional abuse is on the rise, impacting 35 per cent of young people surveyed, and is linked to severe mental health problems that rapidly commence and cause long-term difficulties for children and youth in dealing with key life events and experiences, school performance, relationships, and employment.

These chilling statistics cannot be ignored. We have a responsibility to ensure that these figures do not continue in Australia. The ACMS is the first of its kind and provides recommendations that we must invest into primary prevention.

NAPCAN, along with other expert partners, are calling on the Commonwealth Government to host a [National Summit to prevent child maltreatment](#), in response to the ACMS. The summit is a space to bring together leaders, experts, people with lived experience, practitioners, and policy makers from a range of disciplines to work collaboratively to address the statistics. Fams endorses this proposal.

In addition, we recommend that the NSW Government establish a state-based government and sector taskforce to meet quarterly to drive coordinated reform. The taskforce should bring together leaders, experts, people with lived experience, practitioners, and policy makers from a range of disciplines. The taskforce should discuss and address the findings of the study and develop an action-oriented plan with clear lines of accountability.

The research that has emerged from the ACMS shows us that reducing child maltreatment requires an all-hands-on-deck approach. We must act now.

¹ The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: 2023 Brief Report - <https://www.acms.au/resources/the-prevalence-and-impact-of-child-maltreatment-in-australia-findings-from-the-australian-child-maltreatment-study-2023-brief-report/>

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Endorsements



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