
ENHANCING SAFETY IN WORK WITH FAMILIES AFFECTED BY FAMILY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: FINDINGS FROM PRACTITIONER FOCUS GROUPS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Family and domestic violence is a major health and welfare issue that is experienced by one in ten Australian families, many of whom have children. The consequences of exposure to family violence can be profound and enduring. In Australia, many families who experience family and domestic violence separate: when mothers escape violence (with or without her children), when children are removed by statutory child protection services or when violent family members are taken into custody. In some instances, separation can be enduring but for other families might 'reunify' in part or as a whole. To understand how reunification is experienced by Australian families, the Commonwealth Department of Social Services commissioned a study to capture the views and experiences of families who had experienced violence and separation and the practitioners who support them.

The study

The study, conducted by researchers from the University of South Australia and Curtin University, involved interviews with mothers, fathers and young people who had experienced family violence as well as focus groups with practitioners from agencies that support them. It was conducted with ethical approval from the Aboriginal Health Research Ethics Committee (AHREC).¹

The study focused on family members' safety and considered: what safety means to families reunifying after periods of violence and separation; what fosters family safety during reunification; and what guidance families experiencing reunification would give to those working with them to improve their safety.

This report presents findings from 9 focus groups with 44 practitioners from health, youth, family support, family and domestic violence, and Aboriginal agencies. It is complemented by a report of findings from interviews with family members (see Moore, et al, 2020a) as well as a practice brief.

¹The AHREC approval was ratified by the University of South Australia, Curtin University and the WA Aboriginal Health Ethics Committees.

Findings and implications

Understanding safety

Practitioner participants generally conceptualised safety during reunification as being the absence of violence and the threats of violence for families who had experienced them in the past. In addition, participants believed that definitions of family safety needed to consider emotional and psychological safety, where all family members (particularly children) were provided a family environment where they were able to live and grow and were supported to overcome the traumas and impacts of violence and separation. Safety was fostered when families were provided supports to deal with ongoing and emerging issues (including housing instability; social isolation; and mental health and alcohol, other drug issues).

Participants argued that reunification was unsafe for families when violence continued, when they were not equipped to manage ongoing challenges, when parents' capacity was restricted due to the ongoing impacts of childhood adversity and past trauma, when individual family members were unable or unwilling to return home but had no other options, and when supports and services were withdrawn before families were able to readjust and recover.

What helps foster safety for families reunifying?

Participants believed that individual practitioners, services and systems provided assistance to help families to manage past problems and emerging challenges. This required all those working with families to understand the nature, dynamics and impacts of violence and to be trauma-informed in their approaches.

Aboriginal participants, in particular, stressed the need to foster cultural safety: where culture and community are celebrated and utilised as a way of improving family's safety and where family challenges were understood in an historical context in which practices caused significant harm to Aboriginal people and fractured families and communities. The need to ensure that all workers, staff and organisations support Aboriginal families in ways that are respectful of Aboriginal people, challenge racism and promote Aboriginal culture as protective was highlighted. Bi-cultural

practices (where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff work together) was offered as a way through which cultural safety might be enhanced.

Participants recognised that there were often many different agencies working with reunifying families who often had different goals, mandates and approaches, and that families often had their own hopes, expectations and preferences. Participants felt that family safety work needed to begin with a joint agreement amongst agencies working with families as to what safety means and how it might best be achieved for individual families and family members. Working collaboratively meant sharing information, communicating regularly and working together to meet the family's needs throughout the 'reunification-recovery' journey.

Safety was also enhanced when all work was driven by the safety needs, wishes and priorities of all family members, including children and young people. Enabling individuals to have choices (including whether and how they reunify, what needs they have and why, and in what ways they are supported) was essential, as was the need for supports to be provided when families most needed them. Participants felt that existing service and funding arrangements did not enable organisations to provide supports to families early enough or for long enough and set up some families to fail. The value of working at a family's pace, "hanging in" and for being available when families most needed support were all stressed. Participants agreed with families (see Moore et al, 2020) in asserting the need for the system to see reunification as one step towards recovery and for services to be in place to assist families to overcome past traumas, to readjust and to work toward achieving their shared and individual goals.

Better planning and preparation for reunifying families includes determining whether families are ready to reunify and giving them assistance to readjust to being together again. Providing all family members enough information about their rights, options and available supports was crucial. Family mediation and reconciliation was suggested as a way of helping families who wanted to repair relationships to communicate, to resolve conflict and to heal relationships (including relationships with extended families damaged during periods of violence and separation) when it was safe for this to occur.

1. BACKGROUND

Family violence affects many Australian families, the majority of whom have children who witness, are victims or otherwise experience its impacts (AIHW, 2019; Noble-Carr, Moore, & McArthur, 2019). Since the early 2000s, researchers, policy-makers and service providers have identified that a wide-range of supports are required to meet the needs of families experiencing violence and during their subsequent engagement with the child protection system (Healey, Connolly, & Humphreys, 2018). Central to these efforts is a need to ensure the safety of all family members (Murray et al., 2015; Scerri, Vetere, Abela, & Cooper, 2017; Vetere, 2011) which can be achieved when services and systems focus on the safety needs of families, as both individuals and as a unit.

Reunification is generally understood as the point at which children who have been separated from parents by statutory child protection agencies are returned home. However, there is a growing recognition that families, particularly those who have experienced family and domestic violence, separate and then reunify in multiple ways and for a myriad of reasons. Sometimes this is with the involvement of child protection agencies but often it is not. For example, in Australia many children and young people who have an incarcerated parent are living voluntarily with grandparents or other relatives and receive very little support as their parent transitions from prison back into the community (Dawson et al., 2012). Other children and their families receive intensive support through periods of separation, including contact, family mediation and counselling and transitional support (Salveron et al., unpublished). Kinship carers often provide care for children on a voluntary basis and voice significant concerns in the process from child removal to reunification and often receive limited support.

Missing from the literature is a consideration of how families and those working with them understand safety in the context of reunification after periods of violence. Existing literature primarily focuses on the types of supports that might be made available to families experiencing violence or on the issue of reunification (Jedwab, Chatterjee, & Shaw, 2018; Keddell, 2012). There

is, however, limited guidance as to what facilitates safe reunification within the context of violence and an absence of material on how to provide supports in ways that enhance safety and prevents future harm. Separation and reunification in the aftermath of family violence can include many service providers and practitioners who may be working with mothers, fathers, children and young people or the family unit as a whole. Practice in this context can be extremely complex as different members of the families may have different needs, strengths and goals during this process (Biehal, 2007; Hayward & DePanfilis, 2007; Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005).

In Australia, Aboriginal families are over-represented within the family violence, child protection and justice systems. The reasons for this are complex and must be understood within the context of colonisation that included the Stolen Generations, systemic racism, intergenerational trauma and lateral violence (Cripps & McGlade, 2008). To be safe for Aboriginal families, it has been argued child welfare interventions must be provided by culturally safe organisations in ways that value Aboriginal ways of raising children, foster cultural connections and cultural pride, and are provided with an understanding of intergenerational and ongoing trauma (Zon et al., 2004).

This is the first study to examine the perspectives of practitioners who work with young people, mothers, fathers and extended family members in situations of family violence, reunification and recovery. The sample includes Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal service providers from non-Government organisations, and Aboriginal community controlled organisations. This report draws from focus groups with workers from organisations providing supports and services to families affected by family and domestic violence, including child, youth and family support services; health; family violence; and women's services. It builds on findings from interviews with young people, mothers and fathers who had experienced family violence and their views on safety and safe reunification (Moore, Buchanan, et al., 2020). A practice resource focusing on the needs and experiences of young people also accompanies these reports (Moore, Arney, Buchanan, et al., 2020).

2. PROJECT OVERVIEW

2.1 The scope and nature of this report

The Australian Centre for Child Protection and Positive Futures, with colleagues from Justice and Society at the University of South Australia and the School of Occupational Therapy, Social Work and Speech Pathology at Curtin University, were commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Social Services to conduct a study to explore families' experiences of separation and reunification in the context of family and domestic violence.

The ultimate goal of the project has been to develop evidence-informed resources (including a practice guide, research summaries, and policy advice) for the family and domestic violence (FDV), child protection (CP), and corrections systems to guide the provision of policies and practices that facilitate safe reunification when families have been separated as a result of family violence.

This study attempts to answer the research questions:

- What does safety mean in the context of FDV reunification?
- What are the consumer-informed elements and indicators of safe reunification?
- To what extent are these elements important / implemented and what enables and hinders safe practice in FDV, CP and justice services?
- What guidance would consumers (young people and families) give to practitioners to improve safe reunification?

The study included several components (see Figure 1), including a review of existing literature, interviews with families affected by FDV who had been separated, and focus groups with workers from services with which they interact.



Figure 1: Methods

This report provides an overview of the major themes and findings from ten focus groups with workers from the family and domestic violence, family support, reunification, youth and health sectors.

2.2 Cultural Safety

The project included a specific aspect relating to the experiences of Aboriginal families. Two Aboriginal Advisory Groups provided cultural guidance to inform the ways that researchers engaged with Aboriginal young people and parents and enabled cultural safety. These groups were made up of Aboriginal leaders, experienced policy makers and practitioners, and representatives of key Aboriginal services. The South Australian Aboriginal Leadership Group (ALG) was established in response to the Royal Commission into the South Australian Child Protection System as part of the Early Intervention, while the WA Aboriginal Leaders group was specifically established to guide this project. Both groups met at critical points throughout the research process and provided guidance on research design, methods, data analysis and interpretation and guided how to represent the views and experiences of Aboriginal participants in this report.

2.3 Practitioner focus groups

After conducting 50 interviews with parents and young people, the team conducted a series of focus groups with practitioners to better understand the nature of supports provided to families experiencing family and domestic violence and to gain feedback on the key characteristics and preferred supports provided to families, particularly during reunification.

Focus groups were conducted face-to-face and were recorded with the participants' consent.

During the 90-minute sessions, participants considered the following questions:

- What does safety mean in the context of family and domestic violence?
- What helps and hinders 'safe' reunification?
- What supports and services are available to enable safe reunification?
- What are some of the practical, organisational and systemic factors and forces that influence the success of safe reunification?
- What examples of better practice exist within the current service system?

Participants in focus groups were provided an overview of the needs, wishes and experiences of families who participated in interviews and asked to identify ways that organisations and systems might respond to their suggestions for improvement. A fuller account of mothers', fathers' and young people's experiences is included in the project's main report (Moore, Buchanan, et al., 2020).

In consultation with our Aboriginal Leadership Groups and drawing from earlier interviews with Aboriginal workers and organisations, the team also spent some time considering how to foster safety for Aboriginal families and to engender culturally safe practices in the supports provided to them. This reflects contemporary guidance that when exploring family violence and child protection, an exploration of the specific needs of Aboriginal families and their interactions with the various systems is vital as their experiences (although sometimes similar to those of other families) are often different (de Leeuw & Greenwood, 2017; Fiolet, Tarzia, Hameed, & Hegarty, 2019; Jarvis, 2018; Spangaro et al., 2016).

2.4 Ethics

Ethical approval was sought and provided by the South Australian Aboriginal Health Research Ethics Committee (Approval O4-18-781) and ratified by the University of South Australia's and Curtin University's Ethics Committees and the WA Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee.

2.5 Recruitment

Focus group participants were recruited through family and domestic violence services, child and family support, youth programs and Aboriginal community controlled agencies. Contact was made with organisational leaders who were provided a briefing of the project and its intended outcomes.

Organisations were then provided with information sheets (attached) and consent forms. Each organisation had a different approach to identifying potential participants. Some organisations sent a generic email to all staff asking for volunteers, while in other agencies specific services, programs and practitioners were targeted. Organisations were encouraged to invite practitioners who were working directly with families affected by family and domestic violence, particularly when there was some form of separation due to child protection or other statutory intervention.

2.6 Participants

Forty-four focus group participants were drawn from services interacting with young people and/or families affected by family and domestic violence who had been separated and were reunifying. Participants came from child, youth and family support services; family and domestic violence agencies; and health programs.

Within the sample, 39 participants were female and 5 were male. Participants were most likely to have worked in the field for more than five years and had social work (n=21), community or youth work or counselling (n=16).

When describing the roles that they held in their organisations, participants in the focus groups (n=44) broadly fell across ten categories. The most frequently mentioned roles were Manager or Coordinator of a program or service (n=18), Case Manager or Case Worker (n=12), and Youth Worker (n=5). Less frequently mentioned roles, with 2 or fewer participants holding such roles, were Community clinician, Aboriginal liaison officer, Community development officer, Counsellor, Youth worker, Advocate, Legal Roles, and Students or Volunteers.

Other participants demographics are included in Table 1 below and a broad description of the composition of individual focus groups is included in Table 2.

Table 1 Participant demographics

Participant demographics		Frequency (n=44)	Percentage
Time in field	Less than 1 year	6	13.63%
	1 -5 years	9	20.45%
	5- 10 years	12	27.27%
	More than 10 years	17	38.63%
Post-secondary qualifications <i>Note that 14 participants selected more than one option</i>	Social Work	21	47.72%
	Community Services/Youth Work/Counselling	16	36.36%
	Other	8	18.18%
	Education/Early Childhood	6	13.63%
	Health/Nursing	5	11.36%
	Social Science/Social Policy	5	11.36%
	Psychology	4	9.09%
	Law/Legal Studies	2	4.54%
	No qualification selected	1	2.27%
	Gender	Female	39
Male		5	11.36%
Other		0	0%

Table 2 Group Composition

Group and label	Description
Focus Group #1 (FG_1)	Staff from various non-government organisation, including lawyers, family support and AOD services
Focus Group #2 (FG_2)	Youth workers from youth support and accommodation services
Focus Group #3 (FG_3)	Staff from counselling, women and family violence services
Focus Group #4 (FG_4)	Staff from Aboriginal services providing family support services
Focus Group #5 (FG_5)	Staff from youth support and accommodation services
Focus Group #6 (FG_6)	Staff from an Aboriginal-specific service providing a range of family support, youth and accommodation services.
Focus Group #7 (FG_7)	Staff from a service supporting women and children affected by family and domestic violence
Focus Group #8 (FG_8)	Staff from a service providing family support, counselling and reunification programs
Focus Group #9 (FG_9)	Staff from a service providing support to Aboriginal women and children affected by family and domestic violence

2.7 Methods

Focus groups were conducted by members of the research team who had been directly involved in interviews with young people and / or families. These researchers sought and received consent and led participants through a semi-structured focus group schedule (Appendix 2) that provided opportunities for participants to draw on their own practice experience as well as responding to initial findings from interviews conducted with young people and parents. As such, the focus groups aimed to clarify, build upon and capture practitioner's responses to families' lived experience of family violence and the service systems that surround them.

2.8 Data analysis

Audio recordings of focus groups were transcribed, auto-coded and a thematic analysis was conducted drawing on themes emerging from the qualitative interviews with families and young people. Elements of better practice were sought from the data as well as the practical, organisational and systemic barriers and enablers to supporting safe reunification to families affected by family and domestic violence.

To promote consistency in the analysis of focus group data, the findings from each of the focus groups were analysed by a smaller team. This ensured that common and differing themes were identified.

The variation in responses of participants from the different focus groups and sectors were identified as being due to the environmental differences arising from the variance in jurisdictions. Quotes in this report are used to illustrate the shared experiences of participants emerging through the research and analysis and to provide examples of the themes explored.

2.9 Limitations

This study gave non-government workers an opportunity to share their views and experiences about the safety needs of families during periods of violence and reunification. Although many families experiencing violence and separation had interacted with child protection systems, child protection practitioners were not involved in this study. Considering how decision-makers, leaders and practitioners consider safety is an area in need of further exploration due to limitations of resources.

3. FINDINGS

In focus groups, participants provided an account of families' needs during periods of violence, separation and reunification. For the purposes of this report we focus on the needs and experiences of families and workers leading up to and after reunification. The chapter begins by exploring how services define reunification, safety and cultural safety before considering what participants believed makes safe reunification: including what is done and how it is done – at the levels of services and systems.

3.1 Defining reunification, safety and cultural safety

One of the key observations made in many of the interviews with parents and young people was that there appeared to be different understandings of what safety and reunification entailed

across the different services and systems with which they interacted. As such, participants were asked to consider what these terms meant for both families and service providers.

3.1.1 Understanding reunification

Participants in all groups began by acknowledging that reunification was not always possible or safe. They shared stories of families where it was inappropriate for all family members to be reunited and believed that for many family members, reunification was not something that was sought after. They believed that it was important that reunification be seen as one option and that assistance was made available to those who were not willing or able to return home so that they were not forced to do so.

So, one young person in particular is incredibly transient, moving from house to house to house to house, and so that's seen as unstable. But that's actually her protecting herself and her friends being aware of the situation that does happen at home and that's her way of maintaining her safety ... She doesn't want to go [home]... she can't, but she needs some options (FG_ 8)

Given the diverse views amongst parents as to what constituted reunification (Moore, Buchanan, et al., 2020), participants in all groups then reflected on what reunification means for their organisation and sector. Most participants were quick to state that reunification was:

- The point at which children or young people who had been removed by child protection were returned home
- The point at which mothers escaping violence had their children returned to them at alternate accommodation
- When parents who were incarcerated left prison and returned to their families
- When estranged parents reconciled and lived together
- When young people grew out of care and chose to return home without child protection involvement.

However, across the groups, many of the participants recognised some inherent problems with seeing reunification in such clear cut ways. They recognised that for many families, multiple children were removed at various times and were returned in ways with no apparent coordination and in stages.

And the other thing is it's never going to be a linear process, it's going to be ups and downs and if there's other issues that are going on in mum's life or children's lives and whatever that that working together; you're tearing your hair out together but coming out with ideas, solutions and being an ally for that family and for that mum for her child, or children in that. (FG_9)

Focus groups made up of family support workers made note of the fact that reunification programs often focused on supporting a family when one child was returned home and that services and the system often ignored the fact that, in many families, multiple children were living away from home and that 'reunification' had not been achieved until everyone was living safely together again. This often took prolonged timeframes, with multiple successful and unsuccessful attempts.

Participants in four of the groups agreed with many of the parents and young people interviewed who felt that 'reunification' should be seen as a step towards family recovery. They believed that providing supports for limited periods after one or more children returned home failed to recognise that, for many families, the 'hard work' that needed to be done occurred for months, if not years, after this occurred. As will be discussed in Section 2.4.4, services were unhappy with the lack of enduring supports available to the family as they readjusted to family life and as they grappled to deal with the pervasive effects of family violence and separation.

In addition to seeing reunification as children returning home, participants felt that it also could be defined by:

- Children and young people being safe and feeling safe within the family home (this will be discussed further in Section 2.2.1)
- Relationships within the family being reconciled and changed to meet the needs and wishes of all family members
- Relationships with extended family members and natural supports being repaired or restored
- The point at which the service system moved from compliance and surveillance to support.

Participants agreed with families and felt that 'reunification' was not an endpoint but a stage in the journey towards recovery.

3.1.2 Understanding Safety

As there was a variety of views about what organisations meant by 'reunification' so did participants have differing ideas about what 'safety' means in the context of reunification and family violence. Like families, many participants believed that safety was primarily about the absence of violence, however some also believed that safety was about families feeling empowered, about being equipped to meet each other's needs and to manage the problems and challenges that were both historical and ongoing.

Safety doesn't just [mean no violence]– [it] means a lot of different things to a lot of different individual families, yeah. (FG_8)

Well, I guess, for us, what it has – the tasks that we undertake with families is talking and thinking and having some robust and deep conversations about what safety looks like and what it means for them, what it looks like. So, it's not just going off and saying, you know, who's in your network? Who's your safety people? But it's exploring what that means, what it looks like, thinking it through (FG_1)

Unfortunately, ... safety is not interpreted in the same way by [everyone working with families]– there's not a clear principle or just a definition for service providers, so that we can go, "this is what we must abide by". (FG_6)

- **Absence of violence and management of conflict:** All workers believed that the absence of violence was central to families' feelings of safety. Some participants were of the view that conflict was inevitable in relationships and felt that families who had experienced violence needed to be able to manage conflict rather than avoid it. Parents who used violence needed different ways of managing their relationships.
- **Support to deal with family challenges:** Participants felt that in addition to considering whether there was family violence, services needed to explore whether there were other issues, including drug and alcohol use, mental health concerns and unresolved trauma that limited family's safety and sometimes increased the likelihood that violence would re-occur.

And quite often, there'll be drugs and alcohol involvement there too. So, if that's not going to be addressed as well, then nothing's really going to change. (FFG_1)

- **Emotional safety:** was seen as being as important as physical safety, with some arguing that it was more important. Emotional safety was characterised as the absence of threats, of feelings of anxiety, insecurity and fear as well as feeling comfortable, at peace and optimistic about the future. Participants, particularly those in family violence, youth and family support programs, felt that it was vital that children and young people and mothers were not exposed to threats or concerns that past problems would re-emerge and that those who used violence might hurt them again. For children

and young people who had always known violence within their families, the lack of threats could sometimes be threatening. Enabling emotional safety required young people to 'un-learn' how families interacted and to develop confidence in new ways of relating.

- **A nurturing environment:** for many participants, safety was not just the absence of risks but also related to families being able to provide a safe and nurturing environment, particularly for children and young people.

Well, they've – they have not enough resilience and strength within themselves to be able to provide a safe, nurturing environment. So, you can be free of abuse and violence, if that's what we're classifying as unsafe, but it doesn't necessarily mean they're providing [a] nurturing or emotionally stable environment. (FG_4)

I think it's very much about who they have around them, in terms of networks. And the community and how you can actually also create that safety and maybe that hold that space for that primary caregiver, until they're able to pick that up and work themselves. (FG_1)

- **Material safety:** some of the participants recognised that to be safe and feel safe, families needed to have enough money and suitable accommodation. To be safe they needed to not be anxious about whether they could afford to cover the costs of living, whether they had somewhere stable to live, and had the resources to ensure that children were safe and that all family members could get their needs met. These needs were more pronounced for mothers who left partners and had little access to financial resources, who had to seek out alternate arrangements and who had lost important connections with formal and informal networks. Participants believed that material safety enhanced feelings of stability and predictability.

You know, people forget what a struggle it is. At every level, the individual as well as the bigger level, people forget that it's how unequal and disadvantaged and debilitating poverty is. How can you make choices until you've got the basic food and shelter? (FG_1)

- **Environmental safety:** participants, particularly those from Aboriginal organisations, felt that families experienced stress when they were living in communities or environments that were unsafe. The ability for families to manage their challenges were compromised if they were surrounded by risks, were in communities with high levels of violence and where the community did not challenge violence or support families to sustain positive change.

And even if it's in your own family unit, you are safe, you're providing safety. But [that is compromised if you're living in unsafe environments] ... I went to somebody's house the other night and she's living in a block of units and her security screen – she's just moved in – [her] Security screen's a bit wonky. The door doesn't close properly. You know, she's waiting for all these things to be fixed. Now, she in her own family unit is safe, but she's not safe in her living environment. She doesn't feel safe. (FG_1)

- **Empowerment, autonomy and a sense of control:** Participants, particularly from Aboriginal and family violence services, reflected that during periods of violence and separation, many parents and young people were disempowered by the violence, by the system and in their relationships with workers, services and systems. This, they believed, compromised individuals' and family's sense of safety which could be remedied by greater autonomy and a sense of control.

So, I'm thinking there's - I mean, there's different forms of safety as well, so there'd be physical safety, which is like an absence of yeah, physical violence. But as well as that, sort of basic nutrition and ability to look after someone's physical body, I guess. And then, there'd be psychological or emotional safety, which is both like receiving love and receiving a sense of connection and friendship and social connection compared to also maybe an absence of stresses like anxiety and yeah, the - like self-esteem needs being met and yeah, like a feeling of maybe even being able to be one's self, so an expression of self-identity or sexuality or all that kind of stuff. And then there's I think spiritual safety as well, so like an ability to practice your beliefs or to live out your beliefs and yeah, connect with that sort of - that part of yourself in a safe space as well. (FG_2)

For these families, safety was about being able to safely make decisions without fear of repercussions or being undermined by violent partners or others.

So, being safe from violence, being safe from control dominance, as well as being safe to, so, whether victims are safe to make decisions, are they safe to come and go, so, being safe from and safe to (FG_3)

- **Confidence:** Workers from groups made up of family support workers reported that for mothers, being the victims of violence and having their children removed was incredibly disempowering and made them feel as they were failures as parents. They believed that through reunification, mothers needed to be reassured that they could (and often always had been) good parents and that they would be supported to build their confidence over time.

Youth and children's workers also believed that for children and young people to be safe they needed to feel confident that they were safe and that their parents were able to meet their needs. Often children and young people held feelings of betrayal and being 'let down' by their parents: both during periods of violence and during separation – so workers believed that a key task of reunification was repairing children and young people's confidence in their parents and families.

Youth workers also argued that children and young people's safety also required children and young people to feel some confidence in themselves: in their worth and in the fact that they should be protected from harm. They gave examples of times when young people felt that they deserved their treatment or saw it as being inevitable. Building young people up so that they could expect better treatment was seen as being vital.

3.1.3 Understanding Cultural safety

A strong theme that emerged in a number of the focus groups related to the concept of cultural safety. The Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation describes cultural safety as being acceptable to difference, having the ability to analyse power imbalances, institutional discrimination, colonisation and relationships with settlers (VACCHO, 2020). They argue that cultural safety is about providing quality health care that fits with the familiar cultural values and norms of the person accessing the service, that may differ from your own and/or the dominant culture.

Williams (1999, p213) asserts that the universally accepted definition of cultural safety is 'an environment which is safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need'. Williams believes it is about 'shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with dignity, and truly listening'. The Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA, 2015) refers to cultural safety as the accumulation and application of knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values, principles and norms.

In six of the ten focus groups, participants asserted the need to recognise the ways that culture can protect families and help them recover from the impacts of violence and separation and to consider cultural safety when providing services and supports to Aboriginal families.

I was just want to say I think for our – particularly for our service that a lot of our work around safety is also grounded in culture because there is safety in culture for children (FG_4)

Cultural safety was often described in terms of identity, connections, pride, community and natural supports. Culturally safe practice was often defined in relation to working with Aboriginal families in ways that appreciated the protective nature of culture, traditional ways of parenting, the impacts of intergenerational trauma and violence, systemic and individually practiced racism and the need to have Aboriginal staff with the authority to influence decision-making and practice.

The protective role of culture

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants in four of the focus groups asserted the ways that culture protected families and children and could enable them to manage the difficulties that they encountered. Connections with culture afforded individuals and families a sense of identity, of pride and of community.

Support from Elders, extended families and communities could be invaluable for families: during periods of violence, separation and reunification while instilling confidence in parents that they had worth, that assistance was available and that others were also invested in raising their children.

These participants often argued that Aboriginal families were much more likely to feel safe within organisations where Aboriginal staff were available to them, when the organisation demonstrated an appreciation of Aboriginal culture and when Aboriginal ways of working were embedded in the fabric of the organisation.

Aboriginal workers felt that the systems didn't appreciate traditional models of care for children, particularly in relation to the ways that kin shared responsibility for parenting children and protecting them from harm. As will be discussed further, Aboriginal participants felt that without this appreciation, workers in different parts of the system both missed opportunities to strengthen existing support networks and didn't appreciate the impacts that some decisions made on these family dynamics. In particular, Aboriginal workers argued that often the system "set up" families against each other by placing children in their family's care in ways that forged conflict between them. Efforts to reunify children and young people, particularly in Aboriginal communities, needed to be underpinned by an appreciation of these consequences and efforts to reconcile these natural supports.

And I think in doing the assessment or doing an assessment in terms of reunification, they really need to focus on not just mum and dad, the whole family group because each of those – for Aboriginal families, everyone in that family group has a role to play whether it be around safety or parenting or whatnot, they can't just focus on the two – mum and dad if that's what the case is, because in those families they all have a role, the grandparents, the aunties, the uncles, and they would all play a role in each of those within – in young people's lives, so. (FG_4)

Natural supports

Aboriginal participants argued that there was great capacity in Aboriginal communities that was not captured or supported by white welfare systems. In relation to parenting, Aboriginal participants believed that Elders and experienced parents could provide invaluable cultural and practical guidance to mothers and fathers as they raised their children. Drawing on cultural expertise and traditional ways of parenting, these Elders could help equip parents to care for their children, while reinforcing connections to the community and cultural pride.

We've got Elders that could be telling stories and doing those kinds of things. We're not investing in what already exists in our communities, you know what I mean? (FG_7)

Aboriginal participants also highlighted the invaluable role that Elders, and other community members played in the lives of children and young people. They stressed that historically and culturally, the raising of children was a shared responsibility of the whole community and that children were protected when they were surrounded by networks of support.

I think Western practices have devalued the relationships between the identity of - the importance and the identity of Elders and children within our community. They were the most important people. They are the first people to feed, you know what I mean. But that is the system and it's systemic and until the system changes, I think we're going to continue to have the same issues. (FG_7)

Participants in one group made reference to the Aboriginal Placement Principle which “upholds the rights of the child’s family and community to have some control and influence over decisions about their children” and prioritises the placement of Aboriginal children within family and kinship networks and then within non-related but Aboriginal carers from within their local communities (Arney, Iannos, Chong, McDougall, & Parkinson, 2015). It would appear that across jurisdictions the Principle has not been implemented well or in full. This has an impact on reunification: as the readjustment of young people and families may be significantly less challenging when children remain in their communities with their relatives or other families and attuned to their cultural needs.

Understanding cultural bias, systemic racism and power

Aboriginal participants stressed the significance of cultural bias within the child protection and broader welfare systems. They pointed to the fact that white workers were often blind to the fact that Aboriginal families were placed and sustained in vulnerable positions because of the ways that white people thought about Aboriginal families and the ways that they interacted with them. When workers judged Aboriginal people, when they made observations about their parenting and the ways that they raised their children and when they apportioned individual blame without understanding the context within which children experienced adversity, they perpetuated harm.

By understanding the ways that past and present policies disenfranchised and disempowered Aboriginal people, participants felt that workers might better appreciate the needs and challenges facing Aboriginal families and work in ways that empowered rather than sustained them in vulnerable situations. Aboriginal participants argued that greater investment in understanding and appreciating systemic racism and in recognising and strengthening cultural strengths needed to be central to social work education.

We're talking about disenfranchised, oppressed, suppressed, destruction of families, community. (FG_7)

Empowering Aboriginal staff across child protection and family welfare systems

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants argued that it was vital that Aboriginal staff be employed and empowered to make decisions about how Aboriginal families engaged, were treated and were supported within the child protection and broader family welfare systems. They flagged the fact that currently, Aboriginal people were not provided adequate opportunities to hold senior positions or influence real change in services and departments.

But in response to your thing, is the problem with [child protection] is it belongs to the government and there's systemic racism and it's white people making decisions and white people making policies and, again, there's no Aboriginal voice. (FG_7)

In particular, they believed that it was important for decision-makers in child protection and welfare systems to appreciate how protective culture can be for families, how Aboriginal parenting is sometimes different to non-Aboriginal parenting and how past policies and practice

affects Aboriginal families' confidence, capacity and informal support to provide for their children. Having advocates within the child protection system and opportunities for Aboriginal people to challenge assumptions about Aboriginal parenting was vital.

Well, we have an understanding of their experience. So, we don't come at it as of problem solving. We come at it from a place of understanding and understand their experience, and they're confident in us knowing that. A culturally safe service, if you're talking about white people, is about them able to walk the talk. It's not just about language. You just can't say it. You have to be able to unpack it, and if you can't unpack it then you're not safe. (FG_7)

Participants also stressed the value of skilled Aboriginal workers being available and supported to work with Aboriginal families. This was in recognition of the fact that participants believed that many non-Aboriginal staff members did not appreciate Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal ways of parenting and the systemic and practical racism that played out for Aboriginal families in the system.

[T]hey don't think like, us as Aboriginal people, for example, they don't communicate like us, they don't even have the respect from our clients; so that in itself is difficult for them to come to terms with to understand, well, how do I go out and conduct business? For the first thing our people think about it as a department that are bad people, those sorts of things. (FG_4)

Recognising the impacts of historical abuse and distrust

Aboriginal participants spoke at length about how past and ongoing racism caused intergenerational trauma and distrust. In particular, they noted that forced removal of children and young people had profound and ongoing impacts for Aboriginal families and instilled in families a belief that the system disrespected Aboriginal communities and failed to appreciate their capacity to provide for children and young people. Ongoing racism both exacerbated families' sense of disempowerment while fostering a distrust in child protection systems and welfare organisations.

If you have even been in the system where you've been abused by the system, whether the system has used power over you, whether you've never had a service, whether you've experienced racism, all of those things contribute to a family language, and so you build and breed distrust within that family. (FG_7)

If you want to talk about cultural safety, you have to take into consideration historical factors, because there is that generational storytelling of people in power, and unfortunately that's white

people. So you can't discard that. Yes, that's not what's happening now, but that has been families' experiences, that is the community's experience. (FG_7)

In the context of family violence, Aboriginal participants and those working with Aboriginal families often made strong connections between historical and intergenerational trauma and violence. They believed that parents (mostly fathers) with unresolved trauma histories used alcohol and other drugs, had difficulties managing conflicts and were more likely to use violence than others and that supports needed to be in place to help these fathers and their communities heal.

Because also that - because it's the cultural trauma as well. It's not just individual trauma of the child being removed. That's there but there's also that community and cultural stuff as well. It's all in that but that - who was talking about the healing stuff? (FG_7)

Like other families where children from multiple generations had been removed, participants argued that many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents had their own care experiences which affected them in several ways. Firstly, participants recognised that when children had been removed from their families, they grew up without role models from whom they could learn or be supported to provide for their own children when they became parents. Secondly, participants recognised that as many parents' experiences of the child protection system were not ideal (i.e. their mistreatment, their poor outcomes) they had little confidence in the system to provide positive outcomes for children and were reluctant to engage with workers and a system that they believed would have poor outcomes for their children and families. Thirdly, parents who had their own care experiences were reluctant to seek out support from non-statutory agencies, recalling how there had been consequences for their parents who asked for help and who had their children removed despite or because of these requests.

3.1.4 Culturally safe practice

Culturally safe practice was described as practices that both recognised the protective nature of culture and were practiced in a way that celebrated culture and prevented Aboriginal people future harm, were respectful and optimistic and empowered Aboriginal families to reclaim

identity, pride and autonomy in their lives. According to participants (particularly Aboriginal workers), culturally safe practice supports families to maintain, reconnect or establish connections with extended family, community and cultural values while practicing in such a way that respected and built upon these cultural strengths.

I mean, we've got to think about the cultural safety of the parents first up to go into organisations and feel culturally safe, that they're being treated with respect around it, not just looked at like they're the bad parent, because most parents, mothers, will be condemned then. (FG_4)

Culturally safe practice was often characterised as being aware of the challenges confronting Aboriginal families and aimed to help families understand their problems in context and, through engagement with community, to re-establish their Aboriginal identities and connections. For non-Aboriginal staff and services, culturally safe practice was enabled when staff engaged with Aboriginal people to understand what is going on for families, to understand how their lives are impacted by racism and intergenerational trauma and to recognise how families are struggling to do the best for their children in difficult circumstances:

Those expectations are on mums coming from who? Is it coming from an Aboriginal person? Is it coming from a white person who has totally different privileges? So, they're making decisions from their perception, so there's no cultural awareness, there's no cultural understanding. Do they even question mum about, "What has happened for you? What's your trauma in your life?" No. Let's actually punish her because she's parenting to the best of her abilities, because what are her foundations? Well, there are none. (FG_7).

3.2 What makes reunification safe?

Participants were then asked to consider what factors were necessary to ensure that reunification was safe for families who had separated due to family and domestic violence. In many groups, participants stressed the need to consider what individuals and families needed to be safe and feel safe, their needs and wishes for reunification and how workers and organisations worked with families to determine how their needs might be met. Participants also spoke about the *ways* in which services and supports provided some of the systemic factors that facilitated good safety outcomes. These are summarised in Sections 3.3 and 3.4 respectively.

3.2.1 Safety needs and wishes of all family members to be taken into consideration

Participants in each group observed that all members of the family experienced violence and separation differently and often had different needs and wishes to other family members. As a result, participants felt that it was vital for service responses to begin by understanding what each family member needs and wants and providing services and supports to meet these needs.

Whether it's keeping kids safe within the home and there is violence in the home, what that looks like. It could be a wave – a variation of things... [Safety] – means a lot of different things to a lot of different individual families, yeah... (FG_8)

[A key part] in this work, is to give the mothers predominantly, the voice to tell their side of what, from their point of view, safety looks like and be able to say it as – from their point of view, yeah. (FG_1)

I think when we look at what is safety we've also got the women, it'd be women and children's voices in that as well and understanding what does safety mean for – I think is critical to that client centred approach in terms of looking at what does safety mean for the woman, the child, the family; so those layers to what safety means for – can look very different, again, there's that freedom from violence and - but also it's really important to have the voice of the women and children in determining what safety looks like for them, because that helps us understand those protective factors that on the surface sometimes [are missed](FG_9)

3.2.2 Recognising that reunification may not be safe or optimal

There was strong agreement across focus groups that reunification was not always appropriate, safe or wanted by individuals or families. They observed that some parts of the system saw that reunification was a priority policy goal but that this sometimes placed undue pressure on participants and suggested that priorities needed to focus on meeting the wishes of families who chose not to reunify and providing them assistance regardless.

Participants agreed with the views of some mothers and young people who argued that in some families, staying disconnected from families or re-engaging with families in different ways was a preferred option (see Moore, et al, 2020a). They believed that the system needed to respect these wishes and not disincentivise such choices. For example, in three groups, participants noted that mothers were sometimes encouraged to return to violent partners. They reported that the Family Courts favoured awarding custody to fathers, who used violence, who were able to provide their children stable housing over placing them with mothers, who did not use

violence, but who had not yet secured sustainable living arrangements. To be with and protect their children, mothers were encouraged to return home.

At the same time, some participants felt that it was their role to discourage reunification when it was unsafe for family members to reunite. In particular, youth workers reported that many of their young clients wished to return home, even when it was clear that it was unsafe for them to do so. Often this was because young people were desperate to have a family or because they believed that being unsafe was better than being homeless or living in unideal conditions (which was the unfortunate reality for many). In such instances, youth workers felt that it was important for them to help young people see the risks while helping them find other options that might not compromise their safety.

3.2.3 All family members determine whether, how and with what support reunification occurs.

Participants in most groups observed that non-violent family members often returned to partnerships or to family units because they lacked choices or because they experienced pressure from the service system, families or communities. Some believed, for example, that without financial security some mothers could not afford to live independently and returned to violent partners because they believed no other option was available. Similarly, young people transitioning from care had a lack of other options than to return home, even if they were concerned for their own safety or would prefer to live in other stable alternative accommodation.

As the choices about whether to return home were sometimes restricted, participants believed that some family members (mostly mothers and young people) were given limited options as to *how, when* and under *what circumstances* they might return. Across groups, participants reported that it was important for services working with families to understand what individuals needed and expected to ensure that reunification occurred safely. This included asking children and young people what they wanted and needed and involving them in discussions about what they would expect from their families.

Now, yeah, they were 13. But she had an opinion. And she had an idea of what she wanted her family to look like. And she had a really good understanding. Like, she would tell us, this is what I want for my mum and dad. This is how I want them to behave. (FG_8)

In some instances, young people needed access to family mediation, for relationships to be reconciled and new ways of interacting with their parents to be negotiated and practiced before they could feel safe.

Yeah. I was thinking, like, for me the safest kind of scenario for reunification is if everybody is willing in the family to have a reunification, that there's not one party that – a child or a parent – that doesn't want it. (FG_7)

In particular, youth workers and family support workers argued that children and young people needed to have opportunities to decide what they want and need and for this to be a central consideration in decision-making. They believed that it would be helpful for children and young people to be provided opportunities to independently make decisions away from their families so that they could speak frankly about what they think is in their own best interests alongside the interests of their families.

3.2.4 Understandings of trauma, family violence and separation

Workers from both family and domestic violence and other sectors argued that although the level of understanding of the extent of family violence had increased, many parts of the system were not good at identifying families who were experiencing violence and at providing violence-informed responses to their needs. Workers believed that staff who worked with families across the system (including those providing counselling, gambling, alcohol and other drug, and court support) should screen families for family and domestic violence to ensure that they could work in ways to prevent harm.

Participants also believed that it was helpful for families to better understand violence and impacts. They reported that in many families, parents, in particular, under-appreciated the impacts that violence can have on children and young people. In one focus group, participants shared how a group of parents who attended trauma-informed training were surprised to find that just being exposed to violence had an impact on children's development and their overall health and

wellbeing. Similarly, participants, who had roles that supported families over some time, gave examples of scenarios when parents found it difficult when children and young people did not easily readjust to living back at home post-separation and reunification. Appreciating that children and young people needed time to get into new routines, to reacclimatise to living with their birth families and to manage the impacts of traumatic separations was vital.

It's physiological, that's right. It's coping brain. So, we're just on – and what we thought was the mothers wouldn't understand what's going on in the brain, but when we started talking about the brain and break it down, the mums got it. But then, the mum's got – is that why I act like that? (FG_8)

As parents did not always appreciate the impacts of their children's exposure to violence and separation, participants in a number of groups observed that often the system and services did not appreciate the trauma experienced by families and individual family members during periods of violence and separation. In particular, participants felt that the system underappreciated the existence and impacts of intergenerational and historical trauma and the ways that families were negatively affected by violence and their involvement within the service system.

Some participants also observed that separation was often traumatising for individuals and families and that support was required for families to both understand and manage the enduring impacts of this trauma. In particular, participants stressed that during periods of separation, relationships between parents and children were strained which had enduring impacts not only on how they interacted but on how mothers and children saw themselves and each other.

I don't think they ever will. The children that were taken from one of my clients, months had passed and I pulled up in the government car just to see how they were and check on them and she screamed and ran away and said, "You're not taking them again," because it's the same car, the blue number plate, whatever it is, white car, and I said, "Oh no, no. I'm not here for that," and all she did was abuse me, "Get out of my house, you're not taking my mum." I was like, "No, no, no," and mum was like, "Cut it out. She's not here for that." So, it's that - something will always trigger them, so there's nothing that will ever take away that trauma of being ripped from her mother's arms or removed from the house out of her - what she thinks is safe. (FG_7)

When you tear families apart you destroy the make-up of who that child is because their identity is strongly connected to the mother that you've said, well, mum is not good so that must mean you're not good. But then how do you create resilient children around doing that stuff (FG_7)

CASE STUDY: Wallaby Creek Child and Family Services²

WCCFS provides services to families, including parenting groups, gambling support, disability and health programs and assistance with reunification. Two years ago, WCCFS worked with a local university to develop a screening tool to determine which families they were working with were exposed to family violence. Rather than just using it in their FDV services, WCCFS decided to use the tool universally and discovered that many families involved in the programs had or were continuing to experience family and domestic violence. As a result, they decided to assume that every family with which they worked were at-risk of violence. They spent time with all families talking about safety, about identifying risk and protective factors related to violence and ensuring that all clients (mothers, fathers and children and young people) were given opportunities to learn about supports that were available if they were unsafe.

3.2.5 Agreement on safety and priorities

Most participants identified that different parts of the system had different expectations about what safety entailed and what families needed to do to be safe. Participants noted that child protection systems often had a very limited conceptualisation of safety: which primarily related to the absence of children's exposure to abusive behaviours or the neglect of their basic needs.

Although this was vital, participants felt that by ignoring the needs of parents (mostly mothers) and intervening in ways that might cause families and children distress, the system failed to meet children's broader safety needs. They recognised that often child protection organisations and workers took the lead in managing families, and that other workers' views about families' safety needs were given less status. This caused frustration and sometimes caused tension in working relationships.

Similarly, there was a view that when offender programs did not consider what non-offending parents and children needed, their approaches did not always lead to positive safety outcomes. For example, decisions to release offenders back into families without considering whether there were ongoing risks for partners (mostly mothers) and children could have dangerous consequences. As such, participants advocated a need for all those working with family

² To protect the anonymity of workers and organisations, names and identifiable details have been changed. Cases may be an amalgam of two stories interwoven when workers' experiences are similar.

members to take a holistic view of what members of the same family required and to act in ways that minimised risks.

[E]verybody's understanding of safety is different, everyone's experience of safety is different... we all look at it through different lenses and we all look at it with our own, I guess, lived experiences impacting on that (FG_ 4)

Unfortunately, ... safety is not interpreted in the same way by – there's no a clear principle or just a definition for service providers, so that we can go, this is what we must abide by. There's nothing underpinning that. So, it's literally in a happy-go-lucky or whoever's assessment is of that safety. But where we find that to completely disservice and unravel our families (FG_ 6)

Similarly, participants felt that different players in the system had competing expectations of families which created challenges for both families and those working with them. In particular, they believed that as the lead agency focusing on reunification, child protection systems generally focused on whether the risks that children might be hurt or harmed were minimised without always considering whether mothers were provided the support to deal with the traumas emerging through periods of violence and separation for both themselves and their children. In practice, this meant that there were limited resources allocated to support family units, as a whole, and mothers specifically. They believed that this was problematic not only because mothers' needs were often ignored but also because they felt that children's outcomes would be better if their mothers' and families' needs were being met.

3.2.6 Questions about zero tolerance

Across groups there were different expectations about what levels of risk of violence were acceptable. As noted above, some services believed that the system should have a zero tolerance approach to violence, particularly towards children, while others felt that conflict was inevitable and that supports should aim at reducing rather than preventing violence from occurring. Participants generally agreed, however, that families needed clarity and consistency and felt that all those working with individual parents, with family units and with children and young people needed a shared threshold and to work together to ensure that families weren't receiving mixed messages.

3.3 What helps safe reunification (what is done)

After considering some of the most basic elements of safe reunification, participants considered how they might be embedded in practice. There was a view that the success of reunification should be determined not only on what is done (i.e. that it is process-driven) but what has been achieved (outcomes-driven). Practitioners argued that safe and also on successful reunification was supported through good planning and preparation for families, education for families on the impacts of trauma and exposure to violence (particularly on children), good safety planning, family mediation and reconciliation, child inclusive practice and engaging extended support networks. The need for these supports is discussed in the following sections.

3.3.1 Information for parents and families

Mothers, fathers and young people all reported in their interviews that they were often unaware of their rights, why and how decisions were being made, and what rights and opportunities they had to inform and challenge decisions that were being made. Practitioners acknowledged this problem and the angst that this caused families during periods of violence, separation and reunification. They believed that this needed to be remedied during periods of reunification so that families were more empowered and were given greater opportunities to take back control of their lives and be able to access suitable supports as they attempted to recover.

I think power is knowledge and that knowledge, passing on of that knowledge of where they sit with their rights, even just giving them lots of invitations to go out and get different information even if they've already made up their mind about something, just encouraging them just to sit with a person that works in that space, just to hear is really important for their – just to make sure that they're getting all the information so it's an informed decision is really critical. (FG_9)

3.3.2 Planning and preparation

Across groups, participants felt that it was vital that reunification and support provided after families came back together was well planned and executed. They noted that often families and organisations supporting them were given little notice of decisions for families to reunify and that as a result, families often felt ill-prepared. Participants recalled that often families were reluctant to slow down the process because they were desperate to have their children returned but that more time to readjust to the idea that the family would be back together was needed.

We need to start preparing ourselves and looking at some of the triggers that you might have with your children coming back emotionally, physically, all of that, financially, and start to put things in place to make sure that this is successful for not just you, but for your children.” (FG_9)

As part of this planning, a large group of participants felt that it would be helpful for all services and supports available to families, as well as informal supporters that might assist them through and beyond reunification, to come together to determine what families needed and who was going to provide help.

[There needs to be] shared understandings between people involved in the families so that not working from different perspectives and that that shared language can really firstly highlight the kind of dynamic in the family [that is enabling FDV]... and dealing with that... and then working so that you're not at cross-purposes, everyone's on the same page... (FG_9)

Having all families involved in such discussions or, in the case of children and young people, having someone advocate for them at such meetings, was considered useful across the majority of focus groups. Sometimes there was a need for an agency to take the lead in advocating for families and ensuring that the various services were working together on shared goals.

I've connected with services or women who have got children being removed or at risk of being removed yet when I've connected with the women she's got five or six different services in place and the thing that's missing is communication, and so I've found that's been my critical role to reduce the DV element that could potentially play out. But because that lack of communication is happening it's then harmed the woman because she's seen to not be doing what she's needing to do to create a safe environment for the children. (FG_9)

Participants recognised that one of the key challenges facing families related to their readjustment post-separation. They shared stories of times when mothers and fathers found it challenging to be parents again, particularly after extended periods when their children were in care. Similarly, participants believed that it was often hard for children and young people to return home and felt that greater investment in preparing children and providing support through the transition home could be invaluable. Some gave examples of ways that foster carers with whom children had built positive relationships were supportive of children as they transitioned home and provided invaluable assistance to both children and their families:

I've got a happy story... one thing which I really loved and which opened my eyes was about safe reunification, so she was reunified more recently with her two youngest children which are at two and three I believe, and so these children were in foster care and they developed quite a strong attachment to their foster carers, so since coming back home to mum, mum has maintained that relationship with the foster carers... so she'll always call them up and put them on loudspeaker to speak with the children and...like, her daughter refers to one of them as Mum or Dad and she's, like, "I don't mind, that's fine." So, I think, yeah, not – for the children's, I guess, well-being is still having contact and maintaining the attachment and relationship with those foster carers who were so critical at a point in crisis, so (FG_9)

3.3.3 Education for families, parents and young people

Participants, particularly those from family support and reunification programs, felt that families needed information and to build their skills and resources to provide for their children and to manage any challenges that would inevitably arise post-reunification. Participants noted that during periods of separation many parents enrolled in parenting classes which were often helpful, but which needed to continue and be reinforced after children returned. Although they recognised the overall benefit of such programs, participants felt that there were a number of gaps that might be filled. Armed with an understanding of how violence and separation affected their children, why their children were removed, and how to help children manage the emotional impacts of violence, participants believed that parents were more likely to experience reunification successfully.

- **Impacts and experiences of family violence, particularly for children and young people:** Workers observed that often parents had limited appreciation of how their violence affected their children and young people, particularly in relation to their development and wellbeing. Participants gave examples of how valuable parents found participation in trauma-informed training (including that which was focused on workers) – both in appreciating their children's needs but, for those parents with their own trauma histories, their own experiences and ongoing impacts.

Yeah, I was going to add [about] men in prison that a lot of the work is around education, because we find that they're not even aware of their behaviour impacting on the family and the children, for example, kids or parent, partners being in cupboards or, "Oh, the kids are in the bedroom, they're fine," they honestly do not connect the dots on what their behaviour is doing to the family, so we would do a lot of lightbulb moments through a very informal education, yeah, discussion type conversations with men. (FG_9)

So they did child safety environments training and that was the most profound change in their lives. Like, all workers get all this input about trauma, about the rules, even though all the – and those women sat there going oh, is that why this – hang on a minute, is that abuse? Not in my family... And [they] self-reflected, because oh my god, I totally get why my children were removed. And if they had told me that, if I had known that, I wouldn't have behaved like that (FG_8)

- **Why individual families had child protection intervention:** In recognition of the fact that many of their clients were seemingly unaware of why their children were removed, participants argued that it was important for all family members to be provided information about why community members had concerns and why decisions were made about interventions. For some this included having meetings with child protection staff to explain what decisions were made and why, for others it was about writing diaries and sharing stories among families, and for others it was being available to families to answer any questions that they might have.

[We would sit with families and read their files together and go] "okay, so you tell me your story on that then. If it's not right, you tell me what happened on that date. And then it's like well, this is what happened. So we then start going all right, so somewhere in there, we know there's a bit of a truth, so it's in that unpacking the story that you get a self-reflection and then all of a sudden, they start to look at their own behaviour and go yeah, no, I get where that's going.. it was a lightbulb moment. They'd go OK, now I get it. (FG_8)

- **Parenting education and Aboriginal ways of parenting:** Participants noted that many families were required to engage in parenting programs during periods of separation. They related that many of these families found this helpful but that after reunification parents sometimes struggled to remember or to implement the practices that had been promoted. Participants felt that ongoing parenting support programs were required so that parents could utilise skills and be coached when they encountered difficulties. Aboriginal participants felt that central to this education was a focus on traditional ways of parenting so that Aboriginal families could utilise culture and have positive views about how their families had raised children in the past.
- **What services are available:** Participants felt that it was imperative for parents to know what services and supports were available and, where possible, to be encouraged and assisted to seek them out. This was particularly in light of the fact that the types of programs available to families while children were in care were different to those that are available post-reunification. Youth services also highlighted the need for young people to know who they could turn to if they needed help and, in cases where they were not safe, how they could be supported to find alternate living options.

CASE STUDY: KURRONG FAMILY SERVICES³

Kurrong Family Services has a large family support program that provides support to families during reunification and after children who have been removed by child protection are returned home. For some time, KFS has been providing tailored parenting programs for families which includes help and guidance to build parenting skills and manage challenging behaviours.

KFS recognized that many of their families who had child protection involvement over many years had enrolled in the same programs as multiple children were removed and multiple attempts at reunification had failed. These families were frustrated that they were given the same advice on numerous occasions and that they no longer believed that they were learning. In an attempt to keep families engaged and to provide them with different information, KFS provided families with a training package that was targeted towards workers. The program focused on child development, trauma and the impacts that exposure to violence, among other things, had on the developing brain. Parents reported that they greatly appreciated the opportunity to understand their children's needs and to appreciate how workers in the system understood their situation and were attempting to respond. For those with their own histories of childhood adversity, the program provided them with insights into their own trauma histories and helped them understand why they sometimes had problems trusting others, providing warmth and security to their children and responding to their behaviours in trauma-informed ways. KFS has integrated some of this content into their programs and provided parents who went through the worker training with a certificate recognising their developing skills.

3.3.4 Safety planning

In six of the groups, participants stressed the need to do thorough safety needs assessments with all family members and to negotiate an agreement about what the family expected from each other to be safe and feel safe. Participants reported that during periods of separation, families were often not clearly informed as to why their families had been separated nor (as discussed above) why family violence was antithetical to children's safety and wellbeing – regardless of whether they were witnesses or directly experienced violence.

Participants in the majority of groups felt that reunification was most likely compromised when violent family members returned home (or children and young people were reunified with parents who used violence) without ongoing monitoring and support. This, they believed, was often due to mothers, in particular, feeling pressured to stay with a violent partner or not having the resources or ability to sever ties. Participants therefore advocated for safety plans that

³ To protect the anonymity of workers and organisations, names and identifiable details have been changed. Cases may be an amalgam of two stories interwoven when workers' experiences are similar.

included agreements on how violence might be prevented, how mothers and children might be supported in the event of violence and how organisations would respond if they were concerned about the safety of individuals.

For young people. I think as well, sort of good, like tips I guess, or just like a – like good practical quick skills. Things like, you know, always have your phone on you when you're with someone. Always have a trusted friend that you can contact in times of need. Think about like a good escape route from the house. (FG_2)

Youth workers also felt that safety planning needed to consider conflicts within the family, particularly in relation to who family members believed were involved in reporting concerns (leading to child removal) and ongoing decisions about separation and past failed experiences of reunification.

Yeah. I think also, when there's such a focus on reunification, if there are – you know, if there are things that happen once reunification's occurred, there's a lot of shame attached to saying this isn't actually working. So that needs to be included in the safety planning. Like, if something's going wrong within the environment, it doesn't mean it's going to be the end of it and it's all going to implode, but it does mean we need to put some more supports in place. So, just from working with quite a few young people who have gone into care, sometimes they'll be the whipping boy. So they'll be the one that the family thinks told child protection about abuse or neglect, so they're very much the one that gets the blame. And I worry for a lot of these young people when reunification occurs, because I think that blame is still there. So I guess it's to be mindful of sometimes young people go along with stuff, when they don't actually – it's not what they want, but it's what the family wants. (FG_2)

3.3.5 Family mediation and reconciliation

Participants recognised that during periods of violence and separation, relationships within families were often strained, difficult or severed. Many believed that often such relationship issues were left unresolved prior to families reunifying and that they played out as conflict as families readjusted to living together. As such, there may be benefit in helping families deal with and manage conflict, and where possible, engage in family mediation and reconciliation.

Such supports were also advocated for family members who did not want to return and live with their families post-separation but wanted to restore and modify relationships, nonetheless. Youth workers, in particular, pointed to the fact that many young people wanted to change the

relationships that they had with their families but were not often given strategies or assistance to do this.

Yeah, I think for us, yeah, a very similar, you know, reconnecting the young person or you know, the resident with the family, just in the context kind of the set by the young person. So, it might not always be too safe or possible to go home, but a lot of young people might want to try and repair the relationships with the family a little bit, but actually stay independent and just kind of build that bridge a little bit. So it's really just kind of what the young person wants to do, I think in terms of reconnecting. (FG_2)

3.3.6 Responding to family members' emotional needs and the impacts of violence and separation

Participants in half the groups recognised that during periods of separation, parents (mostly mothers) and their children experienced trauma that played out through reunification⁴. Youth workers, for example, stressed the fact that during periods of separation their clients often experienced feelings of guilt and shame – about being removed, about living in a violent family and about their perceived sense that their families had failed to protect them. Coupled with distress about not living with families, not being able to protect them and stress related to living in an unfamiliar environment, these young people needed assistance to work through their feelings and to safely reunify. Youth workers, family support and reunification services all highlighted the fact that these enduring feelings often presented themselves during reunification, particularly through children's behaviours, which caused some difficulty for parents.

But I think and also in terms of that emotional support, because a lot of kids do carry a lot of guilt and then being able to deal with that, I suppose the emotional side of reuniting but, yeah, reuniting but still carrying a lot of the guilt and a lot of shame, a lot of judgement, but also the kids also behavioural stuff in their way because if you don't have the skills and not willing to – some people get the kids back but don't want to address what the – I suppose what the issue has been so, yeah, definitely I think emotional support. (FG_4)

Similarly, some workers from across the various sectors noted that parents often harboured guilt and shame and, through the separation period, felt disempowered and lost their confidence in being able to parent their children. They believed that this was compounded by the system

⁴ The language used by participants ranged from "trauma" to "poor outcomes" but generally described negative consequences related to children and young people's time in care.

which reinforced a sense that mothers had failed their children and advocated that services needed to be careful not to perpetuate mothers' feelings of guilt.

And the presence of guilt, yeah, of really accepting the responsibility for this is my problem, because that's all she's ever heard in the relationship, it's all her fault so she takes that into new relationships, it is my fault, and so there's so much shame attached there and if we – and I think DV services have a really important - and must be an active role in that – so that strength based reinforcing actually where the responsibility lies, that you have done your best and that you can't be expected to change the situation because you can't do it, an incredibly complex set of dynamics that actually she is at the bottom rung of being able to change. So, we're not reinforcing that really early so that we alleviate some of that guilt that she just comes into our relationship with, it's really important that we don't perpetrate ourselves (FG_9)

3.3.7 Child inclusive practice

Although many participants stressed the value of practice being driven by the wants and needs of families, there was a degree of consensus that services and systems still needed to have some clear boundaries when it came to the safety of children. This was a struggle for some services that focused on the needs of mothers or fathers and saw them as their primary clients and actively or passively excluded children and young people. Some participants pointed to times in the past when practices failed to consider or prioritise children's safety and that children were affected as a result. They therefore believed that it was still important for adult-oriented programs to keep children's needs "in your mind" and ensure that unintended consequences were kept at a minimum. The extent to which they were doing this in practice appeared to vary significantly across organisations.

In several focus groups with workers who directly supported children and young people, participants felt that safe reunification needed to focus on the needs and wishes of all family members but particularly on the safety and desires of children and young people. This, they believed, was important because children and young people were not always given opportunities or weren't able to have a voice and, in many situations, had little choice as to what and how things happened in and for their families.

Giving children and young people opportunities to directly engage with services was central to this work. This required knowing whether children were prepared and felt able to have their say and coming up with the best strategies to help the family and the services working with them to hear and respond to young people's views and wishes.

Yeah, that's her family. So, it's not traumatic for her, because this is her family and this is what she used to – and she wants to have a space, where she can actually sit on the table with her mum and dad and say, this is what pisses me off family-wise. And this is what I want done and I want all the services to hear that. But she was never allowed a space to actually have her voice – oh, no, we'll send the child advocate out to have a talk to her. (FG_8)

Participants from these sectors also advocated the need for opportunities to be available to children and young people independently to that provided to parents and families. This reflected findings from interviews with parents and young people (see: Moore, Buchanan, et al., 2020) which showed that parents often did not fully appreciate the impacts of violence and separation on their children's lives and sometimes underestimated their need for assistance. There was some concern that often children were reliant on their parents consenting for them to receive support, so it was a role of family workers to advocate with parents the benefits of doing so. There was also a view, shared by a small group of participants, that children and young people should be able to access supports without the knowledge or consent of parents, particularly when parents using violence were restricting their connections with safe outsiders.

Supports for children and young people might include counselling for them to deal with the immediate and long term impacts of violence and trauma, and assistance for them to re-engage with their schools, friends and communities and to readjust to family life. Recognising that during periods of violence and separation some children and young people were 'parentified' (they took on adult responsibilities for caring for and protecting their mothers and siblings) participants felt that these children needed assistance to "go back to be a child again".

3.3.8 Engaging extended families

Some participants, including those from Aboriginal services, felt that although there was some progress in considering how extended family networks might be utilised to care for children or, preferably, to assist parents to foster their safety, greater investment was needed to understand what supports were around families and how other relatives could support safety, particularly during reunification.

It's about working with the families I think in that way as well or, but that was what I talked earlier around having an assessment done on the wider group, not just the mum and dad, because it's rarely just the mum and dad involved in our families, there's always a grandparent around or an aunty or an uncle and that's where they need to start looking at that picture a lot bigger, extending it out to the extended family members. (FG_8)

A lot of the work that we do or in relation to this is actually looking at the safety network of the family and looking at the strengths, existing strengths of the family and rather than looking at why there isn't safety here but what is actually creating safety, and then how do we bridge the gap to create more safety for these children to remain in the home or whether it's safe for mum to be at home et cetera, so a lot of our work is around doing that; they kind of go hand in hand together then. (FG_4)

However, these participants agreed with families (see Moore, et al, 2020a) who argued that many services did not adequately engage with broader family groups. In response to input from family interviews, workers also recognised that although extended families were a key support for families, during periods of violence and separation these relationships were strained. Many mothers, they believed, felt judged by extended family and conflict often occurred when children and young people were placed with kin. In these scenarios, participants perceived that parents often felt betrayed by their families and reconciliation post-reunification was advocated.

3.3.9 Supporting young people exiting out of care

Youth work participants pointed to the fact that many of their young clients voluntarily returned home to their families after 'ageing out' of Out of Home Care. The reasons for this were varied. In some cases, these young people sometimes wanted to return home so that they could re-assume their roles as protectors of mothers and siblings. Others, particularly those who had unstable placements, wanted to return home for some stability and predictability:

I had a client I used to work with just messaged me recently being like really excited about going back to live with their mum and I was like oh, that's so cool, like why is that and they were like, yeah, because I'm turning 18 soon... [but] lots of those environments are still not necessarily safe, but I think the young people find them safer in that they're consistent and that's what they know, and they're probably also more consistent than the fosters care system.

Other young people transitioned home because they had limited options available to them. As they were over 18, they were no longer clients of statutory child protection and, in many cases, because they were not homeless or accessing residential care programs, no longer clients of the non-government youth system. Workers remarked that when some of these young people were most vulnerable a number of systems were unavailable to them.

So then their support reduces. So, when the young person is at their most vulnerable, returning to their family home, the support networks that they did have back off. (FG_5)

Youth workers, in particular, argued that options needed to be made available to young people so that they could either safely return home or be supported to find alternate arrangements.

3.4 What helps safe reunification (how it is done)

Although participants felt that supports were vital for families reunifying, they spent significant time discussing *how* supports should be provided. They observed that for many families, periods of violence and separation were characterised by interactions with statutory and non-statutory services which left them feeling judged, disempowered and disrespected. Participants believed that this took its toll on families' confidence in themselves, in services and with the broader system. A lack of trust, a tentativeness for seeking and receiving support and fears that needing help might be interpreted as their inability to provide for their children all discouraged families from engaging. Participants believed, therefore, that workers and services needed to help families overcome this distrust and forge new types of relationships.

When and for how long services were available and offered to families was also the topic of much discussion. Participants in most groups believed that it was imperative for supports to be offered early, to be available when families most needed assistance and while they transitioned

out of the formal statutory system. These participants were concerned about the time-limited nature of support and saw this as a factor in situations where reunification failed.

3.4.1 Understanding ways parents aim to protect children during periods of violence before, during and after separation

Participants, particularly those from Aboriginal, family violence and family support services, argued that across the various systems, practitioners often had a limited appreciation of the dynamics of family violence and how families (mostly mothers) tried to mitigate their children's exposure. Participants talked about things that parents, particularly mothers, did during periods of violence to keep their children safe (including after reunification): such as sending their children out of the home when there were threats of violence to play on the streets or leaving children with family members at home for extended periods of time to avoid confrontation or to shield them from violent encounters. They reported that this was often construed as being neglectful when they were actually trying to be protective.

[Their role is to monitor risks. Mothers are thinking] "So I know when he kicks off. So I need to see it, so I know when you know, I can tell by the look in his eye or I can tell by that and that's when I know I've got to do certain things. Which might be yell at the kids to keep quiet or send the kids outside, so they look unsupervised, because they're outside, roaming the streets, but it's better for them to be out there than in here at the moment, because we're going to kick off and I don't want them here, so I'm sending them out... you know, [you're spending all your time] almost like monitoring and assessing and then taking action that's going to be protective, that can be misinterpreted by [child protection as being neglectful and not focusing on the child] (FG_8)

Aboriginal participants, in particular, believed that it was their role to help decision-makers understand how parents were trying to keep their children safe and to help them re-interpret their observations, using a cultural lens. They recognised that when a child's safety was being compromised child protection services needed to intervene – however they felt that assumptions about whether mothers were being 'neglectful' in the circumstances needed to be challenged.

Similarly, participants raised concerns about the ways that children and young people's ways of managing conflict and impacts (including taking on the responsibility to watching out for, calming and providing comfort to mothers and siblings) were perceived. In some instances they

were problematised and seen as an issue (described as ‘parentification’) or dismissed (with practitioners failing to recognise how children and young people’s identities often centred on their contributions as protectors, supporters or helpers). It became obvious that *how* children and young people contribute to families needed to be understood by all agencies working with their families so that supports were available to either minimise the negative impacts of children taking on these roles or give them enough confidence to relinquish them (see: Moore, Arney, Buchanan, et al., 2020).

3.4.2 Engaging early, responding effectively

Amongst the various groups, participants often believed that families who would be eventually reunified needed to be engaged early and be supported on the journey towards reunification and recovery. Some family support-oriented workers argued that their organisations could play a part for families during periods of violence and that their support might be sustained during periods of separation and reunification, if this was required. Some others believed that if families were referred to their programs as soon as early signs were identified (i.e. when or before a report was made to child protection) then they might be able to provide support that prevented violence and trauma and diverted children and young people from care, which was often characterised as traumatic and traumatising both for children and their parents.

[Involving] us very early in the piece where [child protection] are still making your assessments provides the opportunity for us to work in parallel to you around educating the family around what they need to build their capacity, and actually working in parallel to meet their children’s needs safely. In that way, the quicker we’ve had the referrals, the more opportunity we’ve had to provide that scaffolding and that capacity building in safe care (FG_6)

This was the ideal scenario for many – with families having contact with the same workers and organisations who could assist them over time. Having these enduring service relationships were valued because it meant that families didn’t need to retell their stories, that over time workers and organisations could build trust and be available to families when they felt that the system “was against them”. At the same time, workers believed that when enduring and trustworthy

relationships were in place, they were more likely to be able to challenge parents' behaviour, particularly if they were using violence or alcohol or other drugs.

Most participants, however, reported that these relationships and supports were rarely available to families. They voiced their frustration that referral to their programs often occurred after periods of crisis or separation, when families felt most vulnerable and overwhelmed.

Workers from reunification services noted that their work might be more responsive if they were available to families for some time prior to children being returned home. Building trust and rapport, assisting families to find support to make changes in their lives and family environments, and deepening their understanding of underlying issues that might threaten successful reunification were all considered invaluable but not always achievable when their engagement commenced at a late stage.

We've had situations where we've worked with children and [the] children have been taken into care and then we've actually had to almost justify our ongoing involvement with that family in the reunification space because under the Departmental models they've got stages of reunification, if a family's not – if they're at stage one and not stage two then stage two is when they do the referrals to the reunification service, so they're, like, "well, we're not ready for reunification so why are you guys still here?", and we've actually had to go in and justify that actually this is about best practice for the family, it's about actually us supporting them through this very traumatic time of their children coming into care and helping being that bridge around understanding why this has occurred, but also continuing to address the concerns around why the children were removed and if the longer we're involved the better it is for this family, if you pull us out and then bring us back in in two months or three months when the family's ready for reunification under the model, you've potentially lost the family in that period of time and then it's not a great outlook for those children. (FG_4)

3.4.3 Supporting families regardless of how they reunify

Participants noted that families often reunified independently of the child protection system.

Young people often returned home after orders expired or after they aged out of care. In these scenarios, youth workers reported that young people no longer had interactions with the child protection system and were not eligible for assistance through formal reunification programs.

Youth workers argued, however, that these young people needed the same types of supports as others and felt that it was imperative that options be available to assist young people to return

under such conditions. Youth work participants gave examples of ways that they tried to provide reunification support to young people but were mindful that family mediation and reconciliation, among other assistance, was not something that they were able to provide.

And that's another systematic flaw, in that [young people] will return to family [after they turn 18 or their orders expire] and child protection will deem it unsuitable, so it's unendorsed. So, then their support reduces. So, when the young person is at their most vulnerable, returning to their family home, the support networks that they did have back off. (FG_2)

Participants from family support and family violence organisations also recognised that in some scenarios parents restored their relationships, including after periods of incarceration or voluntary separation. Like others, these families needed the opportunity to make decisions about *how*, *when* and under *what conditions* the family came back together and needed to be prepared to manage any issues that emerged. Workers involved in the corrections system believed that although progress had been made in the ways that the system thought about the family's needs for offenders leaving detention, a greater appreciation of both the risks and impacts of family violence needed to be central to post-release work.

3.4.4 Progressing at the family's pace

Participants felt that reunification was often unsuccessful when families rushed into having the family back together, when they or others pressured to reunify before they was ready and when services and supports were too eager to aid and then disengage.

Because sometimes, it's done so quickly, because the orders are running out and then, the parents are so flustered when they're not prepared for it and that comes with its own set of problems. (FG_1)

3.4.5 “Hanging in” until families are ready to be exited from programs

Regardless of when families were first supported, participants felt that there was great value in being available to them “for as long as it takes”. Participants, however, reported that due to the nature of contracts and service parameters, support for families usually were only provided for short periods. Child protection, for example, generally withdrew shortly after reunification occurred unless there were ongoing concerns for the children's safety.

Similarly, reunification programs generally worked with families for two months post-reunification. Workers in these programs sometimes referred to a 'honeymoon' period (which was often around 6 months) during which families were able to manage but that after this time families sometimes struggled to deal with the enduring impacts of violence and separation. They argued that supports needed to be in place during but also after this period so that progress could be sustained.

The kids have come home after – I think it's been six months and exactly the same thing is happening again. So, the family's almost fallen apart again, because the parents can't deal with the children's behaviour, because they're so – they're like well, you know, we thought they'd be happy to be home, so the honeymoon period lasted even – I said look, it might last two weeks. Well, it lasted less than that. So now they're in this thing like, you know, we're almost ready to use drugs again, because we can't control these children's behaviour, because we don't know what's going on. And everything we're trying is not working. Like, it's almost like they're pushing me – and they've said, it's almost like they're pushing me to him. And I don't want him, because I know that's wrong now. But that's like – where do I go next? Because that's where it seems to be going. Because again, there has been no bridging... But there wasn't a lot of support when they needed it most. (FG_8)

Many participants advocated for a system response that enabled families to get help for as long as they needed assistance to settle back into 'normality' and to overcome the challenges that they encountered. They believed that this needed to be guided by the family's wishes and needs so that reunification had the greatest ability to be successful.

Just back on the [topic of] time, timeliness, I think as well I thought of the mother that I've been working with, with her four children, so she was recently reunified with all four and she had really positive experiences with [child protection] she even said that they changed her life and they helped her for the better - - - which is really great to hear that so, yeah, she's pretty incredible, but her reunification work was actually going to close and - but she said, "No, can you keep me open?" And so I think they've kept her open for a little while longer... [and] we will continue to support her but I think it also, yeah, it's really important to take the parents' perspective into account as well because sometimes services may think that mothers are ready to move on and then they're thriving, they're doing really well, but sometimes they still need that support so, yeah. (FG_9)

I think as well, that reunification isn't just – it's an ongoing process, even once those connections are re-established, it's a – you know, you need to keep working on it... There needs to be continued support, post-reunifying. Because that's when the reunification happens, is when some of the needs might not be met, you know? Like the child's back and some of the same old behaviours or habits could come back again and [that's when they need help] (FG_2)

3.4.6 Strengths-based approaches

Participants in half of the groups believed that it was imperative for those working with families reunifying to be strengths-based. This, they believed, was in contrast to the ways that many families experienced the system during periods of violence and separation. As families accounted in their interviews, mothers, in particular, felt judged and disrespected by the statutory child protection system and her efforts to care for her children were underappreciated when decisions about whether her children were removed or returned to her care were being made. Workers argued that post-reunification, it was important for services to play a part in helping all family members, particularly mothers, to restore confidence and trust so that reunification might be successful.

A strengths-based approach also focused on the positive relationships that surrounded families and the ways that they could be strengthened through reunification. In most groups, including those with Aboriginal staff, workers stressed the importance of recognising the protective role that extended families and communities could play in supporting parents and families, especially when they encountered difficulties post-reunification.

Well, yeah, it's not about actually just discussing the, I guess, the reasons why there's not safety there, which is very important and relevant, but what we try to do is actually go, look, what are the existing strengths of the family, what's the safety support network look like, what is that looking like in the context of supporting this family to ensure safety for their children in these current circumstances, because a lot of the time those families are going to reunify even if it's not the best option in the eyes of services around them so it's about actually trying to work with them to make sure it is safe for the children to be there to avoid the children having further [time in] care. (FG_4)

Participants often characterised strengths-based practice as:

- Being optimistic about the family's ability to sustain changes and recover
- Respecting families' rights and ability to re-take control over their situations
- Acknowledging that families will have setbacks and make mistakes which can be used as learning opportunities
- Celebrating families' achievements, especially when families were not able to see their progress

I think also, when there's such a focus on reunification, if there are – you know, if there are things that happen once reunification's occurred, there's a lot of shame attached to saying this isn't actually working. So that needs to be included in the safety planning. (FG_2)

And to celebrate achievements. Really make a focus on the smallest of goals. Because I think that was a common theme throughout that people didn't feel as though there was any positive feedback. (FG_2)

Some participants also believed that to work in such ways, workers needed to be optimistic about their work and the capacity of families to achieve positive outcomes. This, they believed, was sometimes difficult to sustain when workers encountered setback and difficulties. They suggested that support and supervision from their managers and teams helped them to sustain positive outlooks. Their ability to be optimistic was also built when workers were able to see the successes of their clients.

I think it's common for workers to become calloused [burnt out] over time, when they see the same situation happening over and over again. The sort of extent of seeing the same thing happening can make you more – I think, from what I've seen, it pushes you more in the direction of just saying, you know, this is too difficult, it's not going to work and sort of losing hope and belief that reunification will work. (FG_2)

So, when you see those things, when you still get communication from the families that have been reunified, and they send you the pictures of their children, they tell you their good news stories, that's what keeps me going. (FG_6)

3.4.7 Trauma-informed

Participants in half of the groups spent some time talking about the trauma experiences of the family members that they worked with. According to these participants, the trauma families experienced often included:

- **Violence-related trauma:** which affected family members who experienced violence, particularly in relation to their sense of safety and security
- **Complex trauma:** experienced by children exposed to abuse and neglect during periods of violence and separation
- **Separation-related trauma:** when separation was traumatic and families experienced distress, when mothers (in particular) feared for their children while in care and when children and young people were restricted from their key emotional support (mostly their mothers and siblings)
- **Intergenerational trauma:** when children in multiple generations experienced abuse, exposure to violence and separation and were affected by racism and discrimination. This affected family members' emotional health, their relationships and parents' abilities to meet the needs of their children
- **Post-traumatic distress:** the enduring impacts of long-term, severe or repeated trauma

These findings suggest that services and systems working with families affected by violence need to be mindful of the ways that trauma manifests, provide supports to families before and after reunification to deal with the impacts of trauma, and ensure that clients don't experience their interactions with services or systems as compounding their trauma.

*"[It's about working] with them [families] to kind of sit through the discomfort of feeling safe"
(FG_5)*

[We have to have] A belief that the parents can actually make the change, or that they actually believe that – and seeing the positive things that they do, the support of trauma, being kind of trustworthy, the workers and organisations being, kind of hanging in there. And about acknowledging those effects of trauma on the family, and what might have happened during the separation time that again often, in that rush and the lack of consideration of what's actually happening, just got to get it signed off and finished, that the actual – the effects of trauma, of separation, are not taken into consideration.

Being aware of trauma and its impacts was crucial for work done with families who had experienced violence. Although many participants felt that their individual organisations were trauma-informed, they saw a significant barrier to working collaboratively with others and, ultimately, achieving good outcomes for families was the lack of a shared appreciation of trauma and how families might need assistance to deal with their trauma experiences.

And that's where shared understandings are really – you can have connected up systems but if you don't have a knowledge of domestic and family violence and trauma then you're not going to be speaking the same language, you're not going to be hearing the same things. (FG_9)

In the context of post-reunification support, reunification and youth workers observed that the impacts of trauma often did not manifest until children and young people returned home and the family experienced some stability. At this point, both parents and children and young people often experienced mental health issues: feeling anxious, depressed and overwhelming feelings of shame and guilt. For children and young people, this was sometimes related to them relinquishing their caring responsibilities (to protect, calm or console (see Moore, et al, 2020c for more)), often manifested in challenging behaviours that often caused more strain in their relationships with parents. Trauma-informed practice recognised the likelihood that family members might express their trauma in different ways, helped families (particularly parents) to be able to identify and name trauma-related behaviours, and helped provide all family members with appropriate trauma counselling.

We see that sometimes as well but slightly different, like I think, when young people have a safe place to stay, then that, the trauma comes up and they start being able to process it, whereas before it was so chaotic, they're kind of in crisis, so we do, we see young people get a safe place to

stay, and kind of deteriorate in their mental health, but I think like they know what safety is and they value it, but it's just, not ever been settled enough to kind of process everything that's going on, but that's hard for other people because they think they're getting like a safe place to stay and everything's going to be good, like, and they don't understand why they're distressed. (FG_5)

Youth and family support workers stressed the need to help young people, in particular, to deal with past traumas so that they might better cope but also so that the intergenerational cycle evident in the lives of many families experiencing violence and separation might be broken.

I've got a young person I'm just thinking about, who has been in care, in and out of care, she was actually reunified with her mum and failed a second time and then she was abused in care. Ever since, she's had a series of really toxic relationships, including the one she's currently in. And when we talk about barriers and things, I feel like she's never – you know, she's had so much trauma in her life and the people who were meant to look after her hadn't – that her belief now, like her self-worth is zero. But her expectation of a partner is now what she's grown up with. So, she's – we're just going full circle and now she doesn't think that she deserves to have anything other than what she's known her whole life. (FG_2)

3.4.8 Bi-cultural practice

There was a consistent view that Aboriginal families engaging with the system needed support that was culturally safe, understood Aboriginal ways of parenting and working, and resisted systemic racism. As discussed in 2.1.4, Aboriginal workers, in particular, believed that families were most safe when supported by staff who were either Aboriginal or had the knowledge, skills and expertise to work in culturally safe ways.

In a number of groups, participants gave examples of staff teams made up of Aboriginal workers who supported families. However, two groups gave examples where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff worked together to support families. This was in recognition of the fact that there were not often enough Aboriginal workers available to support all families and also the need and value in skilling up non-Aboriginal staff to work in culturally appropriate ways.

In the literature this is often described as 'bicultural practice' (McGuinness & Leckning, 2013). Bicultural practice often entailed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers from single agencies working together but also included Aboriginal staff forging collegial relationships with other

non-Aboriginal staff from non-Aboriginal services. In one group, for example, Aboriginal participants talked about working closely with child protection services and staff to help them appreciate Aboriginal ways of parenting, to help them appreciate how Aboriginal families were working to ensure that children were safe (often in ways that may not be considered this way without including a cultural lens) and to challenge non-Aboriginal staff's attitudes and practices. This required an openness and deep respect between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff and for Aboriginal staff to be empowered to raise concerns and expect action to arise.

In addition to staff working together, two groups of participants spoke about the value of ingraining bicultural practice within the broader organisation, from management to direct service delivery. They gave examples of how their organisations adopted culturally safe practice and the benefits that had emerged.

CASE STUDY: Maxworthy Street Family Support Services

MSFSS is a non-Aboriginal agency that works with families escaping family and domestic violence. For many years, MSFS has proactively recruited Aboriginal staff to ensure that all Aboriginal families were supported in culturally appropriate ways. However, in 2017, MSFS consulted with all its staff, clients and local Elders and decided that although the designated programs for Aboriginal families were making good progress that the organisation itself may not be as inviting or as supportive as it might be. With guidance from the local Aboriginal community, MSFSS recruited a skilled and experienced senior manager who was Aboriginal who developed a whole of agency cultural safety plan which shaped the way that all families and staff, regardless of whether they were Aboriginal or not, worked together and were involved in the agency. Wherever possible, MSFSS engaged in bicultural practices where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff worked together, challenging and supporting each other to achieve the best outcomes for families as possible. The outcomes for Aboriginal families were promising, many of the staff they were working with were Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers had been mentored to work in culturally appropriate ways.

3.5 What helps safe reunification (systems)

Participants were asked to consider things at the systemic level that supported family's safe reunification. They spoke about the need to ensure that all workers and organisations working with families who were exposed to family violence had an appreciation of the ways that violence affected individuals, relationships and family functioning. They advocated for better education and ongoing professional development on violence, culturally safe practice and Aboriginal ways

of parenting (as described earlier), trauma and trauma-informed practice, and child-centred approaches and skills. They also felt that collaboration enhanced efforts to foster safety for families reunifying.

3.5.1 Education and ongoing professional development

Within most of the focus groups, participants believed that practice needed to be improved to ensure that families' needs were being met and that all family members were safe (and felt safe) during periods of violence, separation, reunification and recovery. Many of the participants were skeptical about the pre-service training that workers received prior to commencing their work, particularly in relation to violence and trauma literacy. They argued that workers engaged in child protection, family support, family violence, behavior change programs, corrections and family reunification systems needed have a greater appreciation of and skills related to:

- **Understanding the nature and extent of family and domestic violence:** Participants felt that workers across the system needed a better understanding of the prevalence of family violence and how to work in ways that were violence-literate and responsive.
- **Identifying family and domestic violence:** Participants felt that workers, in particular, needed to be able to formally and informally identify FDV early so that mothers, children and young people were provided appropriate and responsive support. Developing skills to identify indicators that might suggest that a family was experiencing violence and the use of screening tools was advocated.
- **Culturally safe practice:** Participants, particularly those who were Aboriginal, stressed the need for greater investment in training on culturally safe (rather than just culturally aware) practice that recognised the impact of intergenerational trauma while promoting culture as a protective factor.
- **Aboriginal ways of parenting:** Participants stressed the need for workers supporting families (particularly those in child protection) to develop a greater appreciation of traditional ways of parenting, particularly in relation to the ways that Aboriginal parents attempted to protect their children from harm and the ways that extended families and

communities had a role in raising and protecting children and young people which are located in culture.

- **Trauma-informed practice:** Across groups, participants stressed the need for workers across systems to be trauma-informed. They believed that training needed to focus on intergenerational trauma as well as trauma experienced by families (including children and young people) during periods of violence and separation and the ways that it manifests during periods of reunification. Participants felt that, in particular, services and systems need to appreciate the ways that their practice either sustains families in situations where they experience trauma or provide them opportunities for trauma to be reduced and for healing to occur.
- **Child-centred and child-inclusive practice:** In response to concerns raised by young people that organisations working with families and parents often failed to recognise the experiences and impacts for children and young people of violence and separation, along with their need and wish to play a part in decision-making, participants felt that all workers supporting families (regardless of whether they have direct contact with children and young people) need skills and knowledge to place children's safety at the centre of their work and to directly seek their views and respond to their needs.

3.5.2 Collaboration and information-sharing

When asked what most often helps organisations to achieve safe and successful reunification for families, many participants were quick to identify collaboration as being essential. Collaboration was seen as being more than referring from one organisation to another or services sharing information about how they were helping families. For many, true collaboration (between organisations and with family members) required professional respect, open communication about expectations, shared decision-making and ability to resolve or manage when teams had misaligned goals or practices.

But I mean, it's hard to [jointly] define collaboration, because some people – it's defined quite differently and that some people will define collaboration – oh, but even referral to such and such. That [is seen as] collaboration... [but it's not because agencies] are not truly working together to support the family. So, I think it depends on how that is seen and perceived by people. (FG_1)

This was for a variety of reasons. In many cases, organisations recognised that what they provided, for how long they provided it and the impacts of what they provided were sometimes limited due to their contracts, their mandates and their capacities. They recognised that if positive outcomes were to be achieved or sustained for young people, mothers or families then a joined-up approach was necessary. This included identifying services and formal and informal supports that might be available to families after programs concluded.

So, if we have done our job well and worked in parallel with services that can provide that long-term support, we have, I guess, a bigger success rate of those children not coming back into care, because we've scaffolded that support around the family long-term. (FG_6)

Secondly, they recognised that there were sometimes service duplication or service gaps that existed for families that might be minimised if agencies knew what each other was doing and a more organised approach was adopted.

I think multiagency responses are really critical to safety, in fact I don't think that safety for families can happen without that. (FG_9)

And so, if we are expecting a family to succeed, they need a full care team for that to be operational. If we've got professionals fighting at the table of who is doing what, if I work in uniform practice, what hope do the kids have and what do those families have?... I guess, from our end, what changed from our end is, we actually invite services to come in to share what they do, and for us to share what we do, and how can we actually have the children at the centre of everything that we do around scaffolding their safety, and wellbeing of their parents, to have a long-term outcome. So, nobody can do it alone. (FG_6)

Thirdly, participants felt that it was vital that services working with families who had experienced, or who were at continued risk of experiencing violence, communicated about risks and helped ensure that families were safe. In some groups, participants spent time talking about the intricacies of information-sharing, in the context of family violence. In several cases, participants gave examples of partnerships between family violence, behavioural change programs, child protection and justice systems that enabled positive outcomes for the families.

In other groups, participants talked about the successes of interagency collaboration that occurred at a systems-level. They spoke positively, for example, about committees that included

representatives from policing, child protection, corrections and family violence sectors that came together to look at how systems challenges could be managed or resolved.

CASE STUDY: WARRIGAL CITY COUNCIL

After working with a number of families where men with violent pasts had been reunified with their families and then had assaulted their wives and children, Warrigal City Council formed a collaborative partnership between child protection services, family support, family violence and men's behavioural programs which met to develop better ways of working. They established an arrangement that they would meet to discuss individual families and develop shared goals and an agreed way of working. With the families' agreement, family violence services spoke with mothers and young people in families where fathers had been incarcerated or were involved in behaviour change programs and asked them to assess how they thought things were going, whether there had been any incidences of violence or any re-emerging concerns within their family. This information was shared with the men's service who was able to, if necessary, challenge fathers' accounts of their progress and call them to account if the rest of the family had concerns. At the same time, the men's services provided information to the family violence supports about how they were working with men to deal with any re-emerging issues and behaviours and, together, help inform safety plans. Fathers were held accountable for their violence and mothers and children had a greater say in what was needed for them to be safe when reunification occurred.

3.6 What hinders safe reunification

Throughout the previous sections, participants identified some of the things that supported safe reunification. They noted that when these things were absent, reunification was often unsafe or unsuccessful. In addition to these challenges, participants pointed to systemic issues including the competitive nature of funding, the lack of investment in post-reunification support, and the need to recognise and respond to the vulnerabilities of young people who were transitioning out of care and young mothers at risk of child protection intervention.

3.6.1 Competition

Participants felt that one of the key challenges to supporting safe reunification related to the way that services were funded. In a landscape where organisations competed with each other for funding, participants felt that there were disincentives for services sharing resources, working collaboratively and providing each other with tools and models for working closely with each other.

I think, often services, and especially NGO, as an NGO, everyone is fighting for the same piece of the pie. And that is probably the biggest barrier to services working in partnership (FG_6)

3.6.2 Lack of investment in post-reunification support

As discussed in previous sections, organisations pointed to the fact that many families needed support for some months after reunification had occurred. There were a number of reasons for this. Firstly, practitioners felt that although many parents had been engaged in parenting programs while their children were in care, they often had limited opportunities to utilise strategies with their children and to be coached to manage emerging issues. Secondly, practitioners noted that often there was a 'honeymoon' periods after children and young people were returned home during which families were often happy to be with each other but were followed by periods where challenges re-emerged and tensions in relationships became more pronounced. It was at this point that some family members regretted their decisions to reunify or needed additional support to remain in the family safely.

Part of our program is about developing parenting capacity, it's really hard to do that when mum doesn't have her children with her, so we would often back onto the contact visits when mum does have the children around supporting and building parenting capacity (FG_4)

Participants pointed to the fact that often when families needed assistance the most, they were unable to find supports that could help them deal with re-emerging impacts of trauma as well as the stressors that compounded the likelihood that violence would occur and that mothers, children and young people were unsafe. They highlighted the need for reunification and other family support services to be available to families for as long as they needed it and for case files to be re-opened during periods of difficulty.

3.6.3 Interrupting intergenerational transmission

As demonstrated in family interviews (see: Moore, Buchanan, et al., 2020), children and young people are often profoundly affected by their experiences of violence and separation. Participants believed that these impacts were often sustained into adulthood and played a part in the ways that they forged their own intimate relationships and had their own children. Practitioners felt that it was imperative that intergenerational cycles are broken and believed that this could be achieved if intensive support was provided to all children and young people that focused not only on immediate issues but also aimed to prevent harm for the next

generation. This, they believed, required helping children and young people who experience violence and separation to be provided supports to manage the emotional, psychological and social impacts. It also meant preparing children and young people to forge healthy relationships with their own future partners and equipping them to safely raise future children.

Younger mothers

Youth work participants gave examples of young women they worked with who had their own childhood experiences of family violence who then became parents with violent partners. In interviews with young women (see Moore et al, 2020), young participants observed that they were more likely to end up with abusive partners because they had low expectations about themselves and often saw abuse as being inevitable 'for people like us'.

Youth workers gave examples of the challenges faced by these young women as they had their own children. They reported that their young clients were pessimistic about their parenting, feeling ill-prepared for the role and highly scrutinised by staff who, they believed, saw them 'failing as parents' as being inevitable. They felt that these young women were often fearful about having their own children removed and were sometimes reluctant to seek support, worried that their children would suffer the same problems that they themselves had encountered. Youth workers argued that these young mothers needed support to build their capacity and confidence in themselves and in the service system.

Yeah, so about 50 percent of our program is young parents, and lots of them have child protection in there somewhere... [their children are removed and because of their own histories] they don't see much hope for much else... We have to break the cycle, make it that [removal] is not inevitable or we're going to see more kids go into care (FG_5)

4. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Worker participants shared stories of families that they had worked with who had safely and successfully reunified and they also recounted some of the things that the participants believed were essential in ensuring that positive outcomes were achieved and sustained.

In this final chapter, we provide a summary of their views in relation to the broad research questions, beginning with a discussion about how various terms might be considered. We also make links to findings from interviews with mothers, fathers and young people reported in more detail elsewhere (see: Moore, Buchanan, et al., 2020).

4.1 What does reunification mean when working with families affected by violence?

Worker participants were of the view that reunification was a term that narrowly defined one way that families came back together after periods of violence and separation – namely that a child or a group of children returned home. This, they and families argued, did not capture the variety of ways that families came back together including:

- When mothers escaping violence had their children returned to them in alternate accommodation
- When parents who were incarcerated left prison
- When estranged parents reconciled and began living together again
- When young people aged out of care and chose to return home without child protection involvement.

Like many mothers and young people, worker participants were supportive of the idea that reunification marked the point at which families came back together but was only one step towards recovery: where families were managing challenges, had overcome the impacts of violence and separation and experienced some stability. Reunification was safe and successful when children and young people were safe, when relationships were reconciled, relationships with extended family members were repaired and restored, and when service responses were more about support than compliance or surveillance.

4.2 What does safety mean in the context of reunification?

Practitioners believed that it was important that all those working with families needed to have a shared appreciation of what safety means to families and to the various services and systems that work with them.

And that's where shared understandings are really – you can have connected up systems but if you don't have a knowledge of domestic and family violence and trauma then you're not going to be speaking the same language, you're not going to be hearing the same things. (FG_ 9)

For worker participants, as with families who were interviewed (see: Moore, Buchanan, et al., 2020), safety often related to the absence of violence and the threats of harm, families being provided supports to deal with past and emerging challenges, emotional safety (where family members were comfortable, at peace and optimistic about the future) and where family members (particularly children) were provided a nurturing environment within which to live and grow. Material safety related to having enough money and support to thrive while environmental safety related to living in neighbourhoods and communities that were safe for families and children. When families were safe, they developed greater confidence in themselves, their ability to cope and in workers, organisations and systems.

4.3 When is reunification unsafe for young people, mothers, fathers and / or families?

Participants in focus groups and interviews recognised that it was not always safe for families to reunify. In particular they, and family members, argued that the safety of individuals and family units was compromised when:

- Violence and threats of violence continued
- Families were unable to deal with other challenges (such as alcohol or other drug use, mental illness, non-violent family conflict)
- Parents' parenting capacity was restricted due to the ongoing impacts of childhood adversity and trauma
- Individual family members were unwilling or unable to safely return home but felt that there was no other option than to return
- When needed supports and services were withdrawn before families were able to readjust and overcome the impacts of violence and separation

4.4 What helps foster safety for families reunifying?

Safety was fostered when mothers, fathers and children and young people had opportunities to determine what they need to be safe and feel safe and Safety was fostered when mothers, fathers and children and young people had opportunities to determine what they need to be safe and feel safe and when supports were in place to meet their safety needs. This includes recognition of the fact that for some family members, reconfiguring relationships was sought instead of reunification. It also requires consideration of how families are able to access information, be able to safely share their needs and views, and be empowered to make decisions that impact their lives. This may require them to be able to seek out and receive supports without the knowledge or consent of their parents (when there may be consequences for them if their engagement with supports are known) and for services to assume an advocacy role to promote their needs, wishes and best interests (Jedwab et al., 2018; Mateos Inchaurredo, Fuentes-Peláez, Pastor Vicente, & Mundet Bolós, 2018; Moore, Arney, Buchanan, et al., 2020).

Safety was also fostered when all players had an understanding and appreciation of how violence and separation took its toll on families and individuals, particularly in relation to past and ongoing trauma. Worker participants believed that when parents understood and were provided support to manage their own trauma histories and those of their children, reunification was more likely to be successful. Similarly, a trauma-informed approach to working with families was considered necessary to holistically meet the family's needs.

In addition to considering what supports are provided to improve family members' safety after reunification, worker participants considered the *ways in which* supports and services were provided. For Aboriginal workers, in particular, it appeared that the *doing* of support was as important as *what was done*. This complements the notion of culturally safe practice promoted elsewhere:

Culturally safe practices recognise and laud the idea that [keeping families safe relates mostly to what is provided to families]: instead, working in the area of child welfare is about relating and responding effectively to people with diverse needs and strengths in a way that the people who are most affected by the services can define as safe (de Leeuw & Greenwood, 2017, p144)

Participants advocated the need to be driven by the needs, wishes and priorities of families as units and as individuals. Central to fostering safety was ensuring that all family members had options and were able to make choices about when, how and under what conditions they would reunify. Recognising that often children and young people were deeply affected by violence and separation and were not always given opportunities to express their needs and wishes, the value of child-inclusive practice was asserted. In some cases, this required services and systems to enable and support children and young people to access services and be provided independent advocates who could speak on their behalf: sometimes without the knowledge or consent of parents. Assistance should also be in place to enable family members who were not safe or who were not willing to stay reunified to move away and re-define the nature of their relationships.

Similar to previous findings (Guy, Feinstein, & Griffiths, 2014; Spangaro et al., 2016), worker participants also spoke about the need to consider the timing of supports provided to families aiming at reunifying and stressed the value of engaging families early in the life of a problem, working at the family's pace and "hanging in" until families were ready to withdraw from formal services and supports.

Safety was also fostered when family strengths, as well as difficulties, were at the front of workers, services' and systems' minds. Recognising that many family members, particularly mothers and children, felt judged, shamed and disempowered during periods of violence and separation, participants stressed the need to rebuild confidence, optimism and trust in families, communities and systems. These findings strengthen findings from interviews with mothers and previous studies that recognise the need to challenge victim-blaming and to build on family strengths (Asay, DeFrain, Metzger, & Moyer, 2016; Hines, 2015).

In addition, workers, particularly those who were Aboriginal, stressed the need for services and practice to be culturally safe. They argued that to be culturally safe, organisations and individual workers must appreciate the historical context within which they operate and the past and ongoing ways that the system causes significant harm to Aboriginal people: destroying lives and

fracturing families and culture. This view reflects findings of previous research with Aboriginal families on responses to family violence (Cripps & McClade, 2008; Fiolet et al., 2019; Jarvis, 2018; Robinson, Mares, & Arney, 2017; Spangaro et al., 2016).

Culturally safe practice grounded family safety within culture and acknowledged, strengthened and facilitated opportunities for families who were reunifying to access the strengths of extended families and communities (when it was safe to do so), for parents to build on their capacity (guided by traditional Aboriginal ways of parenting) and for mothers, fathers and young people to develop cultural pride and identity. Reflecting cultural practices; elders, community members and kin might be engaged in making decisions and supporting families as they prepare for reunification, come back together and journey towards recovery and healing.

Worker participants also argued that to be culturally safe, individual workers, agencies and systems needed to recognise and foster the protective role that culture plays in the lives of Aboriginal families, mothers and children and the ways that extended families and communities can help parents care for and protect their children. As in previous research with families, understanding violence and the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in care in the context of intergenerational trauma, colonisation and systemic racism was stressed (Cripps & McClade, 2008; Fiolet et al., 2019; Jarvis, 2018; Robinson et al., 2017; Spangaro et al., 2016).

Worker participants stressed the importance of working collaboratively: both with families and other parts of the system. This went beyond making referrals to having a shared appreciation of family's needs, to sharing information about risks and family progress, and working together to ensure that supports were available when families needed them. Similar to previous research, bi-cultural practice, where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff worked together, was seen as a way of fostering cultural safety and increasing the confidence of Aboriginal families in engaging with services (Cripps & McClade, 2008; de Leeuw & Greenwood, 2017; Spangaro et al., 2016).

4.3 Implications: Improving families' safety during reunification and beyond

In focus groups, practitioners identified a number of ways that the safety of families might be improved at the organisational and systemic levels. Developing a shared appreciation and a stated commitment to improving family's safety were seen as vital first steps, as was investing in enduring supports that could assist families as they recovered from the impacts of violence and separation. Fostering cultural safety for both Aboriginal families and staff and strengthening cultural governance and bicultural practice were advocated. Finally, participants stressed the need to break cycles of intergenerational trauma, violence and separation, and argued that effort needed to focus on helping children and young people heal from past traumas and be equipped in their own future relationships and parenting roles.

Enhancing the involvement of mothers, fathers, children and young people

As was demonstrated in interviews with mothers, fathers and young people, families can and need to be involved in informing and determining how they are supported during periods of violence, separation and reunification. This requires them to have enough information to understand what is going on, how decisions are being made, what rights they have and what resources are available. Attempts to involve families in decision-making must be underpinned by an understanding that many family members are actively disempowered by those who use violence and throughout their engagement with various services and systems. Providing them opportunities to build their confidence, for advocates to speak on their behalf and to advocate their needs (when they choose not to) and for all services to provide all family members (including children and young people) with information on what is being done was promoted.

Shared understanding and commitment to ensuring safety in policy and practice frameworks

Focus group participants observed that users of services understand and experience safety differently to workers, organisations and systems whose views, mandates and approaches to identifying and implementing supports to foster safety varied greatly. This highlights a need for all organisations, services and systems to be clear about what safety goals and expectations they have of families including, but not limited, to family and domestic violence and, in the case of child protection, preventing abuse and neglect. Jurisdictions may consider negotiating a

shared definition that underpins its policy and practice frameworks to enable systemic responses to family and domestic violence, child protection and other related issues.

These frameworks should include guidance as to how systemic issues might be reduced. In particular, the ways that the system places pressure on families to reunify when this is unsafe and unnecessarily prolongs separation (for example, when mothers escaping violence are unable to secure sustainable housing while their children are in care, while their children are unable to be returned until stable housing is enabled). Given that many mothers, fathers and young people reported little opportunity to voice their needs and wishes and the fact that they felt that, systemically, services failed to meet their felt needs, client participation might be included as a central tenet to these frameworks (Jedwab et al., 2018). As with previous research, the need to provide children and young people opportunities to participate were advocated (Mateos Inchaurredo et al., 2018). In many cases, this should not require parental knowledge or consent when there may be consequences for children and young people seeking support.

Collective understanding and commitment to ensuring safety in practice

When collaboratively working with individuals or families, organisations should also consider the differing ways that safety is understood and prioritised within families (as individuals and groups) and how partners can work together to meet their broad safety needs. This would require assessments that consider:

- Each family member's safety priorities, particularly in relation to whether, how and when reunification might occur
- Past and ongoing experience of trauma
- Risks associated with family and domestic violence
- Risks associated with other family challenges (including mental health and alcohol and other drug issues)
- Impacts of family violence: including effects on physical, emotional, psychological, relational, social, financial and cultural wellbeing
- Impacts of separation: including effects on emotional, psychological, relational, social and cultural wellbeing as well as on identity, confidence in self, others and systems and family functioning
- The family's goals for reunification and recovery

These efforts to better understand the safety needs of families and to make quality assessments would need to be reinforced through violence-literate and trauma-informed staff training, professional development and supervision as well as well-constructed tools that would enhance practice.

Supporting families early and enabling enduring supports with a focus on safety and recovery

Like families interviewed in this study (see: Moore, Buchanan, et al., 2020) practitioner participants argued the need for supports to be provided earlier and for longer so that families might reunify safely. Echoing the conclusions from previous research (Carlson, Hutton, Priest, & Melia, 2020; Mateos Inchaurredo et al., 2018), these findings suggest that reunification is less likely to be safe and to be successful when families and support agencies are ill-prepared for reunification, when there was poor planning and shared decision-making and when reunification services were not engaged early enough to support successful transitions for families and individuals.

Similarly, families and practitioners reported that when supports were withdrawn before families had readjusted to living together and were equipped to manage the ongoing impacts of past trauma, violence and separation problems re-emerged. Viewing reunification as one step to recovery (where families were managing, had readjusted to the challenges of living back together, were managing the impacts of past trauma, violence and separation and experienced some 'normality') was advocated. This would require family reunification and family support services to be made available for longer periods rather than been capped at two months post-reunification.

Recovery-oriented supports would include assistance to reconcile relationships within nuclear and extended families. Like in previous research (Bradbury-Jones, Morris, Sammut, & Humphreys, 2020; Moulding, Buchanan, & Wendt, 2015), mothers, young people and practitioners all reported on the toll that violence and separation take on mother-child relationships so a need to invest in assistance to rebuild these relationships was paramount. Similarly, our findings also give weight to the need to assist family members who want to re-engage with extended family networks when it is safe to do so. In such instances, support is often needed to rekindle relationships between nuclear and extended family networks to maximise informal supports and

restore positive connections. Engaging with individual family members to determine whether this can be done safely is imperative.

Mothers, fathers and young people gave examples in their interviews of times when they needed to be away from unsafe or dysfunctional family connections to abstain from violence and other challenges (i.e. alcohol or other drug use) and reported that they were not always ready to reconnect with extended networks (Moore, Buchanan, et al., 2020).

Fostering cultural safety, including through bicultural practice

For Aboriginal families and workers to be safe through periods of separation, reunification and restoration, practitioners stressed the need for workers, organisations and systems to be culturally safe. This requires non-Aboriginal workers and organisations to understand violence and separation in the context of historical abuse, child removal and systemic racism and the impacts of intergenerational trauma and adversity. It also stresses the importance of appreciating culture as protective and investing in efforts to strengthen cultural pride, identity and support provided within communities. Initiatives to anchor safety and recovery as central tenets of organisational and systemic responses to violence and separation must be informed by an appreciation of cultural safety and be developed in partnership with Aboriginal people (Spangaro et al., 2016)— particularly in light of the over-representation of Aboriginal people experiencing family and domestic violence and separation.

Cultural safety also relates to the safety of Aboriginal practitioners working with families and within organisations. To ensure their safety, organisations and systems must appreciate the toll that this work can take on Aboriginal workers while ensuring that they are given the authority to share decision-making related to work with Aboriginal families and communities (Bessarab & Crawford, 2010; McGuinness & Leckning, 2013). The value of recruiting and supporting Aboriginal practitioners to leadership roles was stressed and could be enabled by greater investment in cultural governance (Clark et al., 2020).

Similarly, participants in a number of groups gave examples of bi-cultural practice where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers partnered and worked collaboratively with Aboriginal families. Models of bicultural practice are increasingly implemented in Australia, although there is need for further implementation: particularly in child protection, family support and family and domestic violence sectors (McGuinness & Leckning, 2013). Investment in strengthening these approaches was advocated.

Breaking cycles of intergenerational trauma, violence and separation

Practitioners recognised that many families who were interacting with child protection, family violence and reunification services had experienced significant trauma and that this was often sustained intergenerationally. Across groups, practitioners felt that it was imperative that the various systems aim to break these cycles to ensure that future children and young people, mothers and fathers did not encounter the same problems as their forebears. Investment in initiatives for early intervention, was advocated, particularly for young people with trauma histories, those with care experience and those who were young parents. Such interventions need to focus on responding to past and ongoing traumas, in engendering a belief that violence and separation are not inevitable, that relationships can be healthy and that, with quality support, they can be good parents. Although there are numerous programs that aim to meet the needs of young parents and young people forming relationships, it is unclear as to whether these are trauma-informed, understand young people's needs in the context of violence, separation and their impacts, and are complemented by therapeutic assistance that meets young people's broader psychosocial needs. Consideration of how they might be modified to meet the needs of young people with violence and trauma histories is warranted.

5. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This study aimed to understand the safety needs of families during periods of violence, separation and reunification and to consider ways that services and systems might foster safety in instances where families reunified. Mothers, fathers and young people all pointed to the vital role that workers and organisations from child protection, family support, child and youth and health sectors played in their lives but also the relational, organisational and systemic challenges that compromised their safety as they transitioned through the system.

By engaging practitioners in this study, we were able to further contextualise the experiences of families and more fully account for the strengths and weaknesses in the current system while opening up opportunities to explore ways that things could be improved for those experiencing it. In focus groups, practitioners expressed a desire to improve family members' safety and gave examples about how practice had been strengthened by a greater understanding of family violence and its dynamics, and by providing more opportunities for agencies and systems to work together to better meet the safety needs of families. These efforts were often reliant on the efforts of individual staff or organisations. We hope that the findings of the study might open opportunities for this progress to be replicated and strengthened through Australia.

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APPENDIX 1: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEETS



University of
South Australia

Supporting Safe Reunification in the Context of Family Violence

Participant Information

(Focus Group with Workers)

**You are invited to participate in a focus group
about when you think it is safe to reunite families who have experienced
family violence and what support these families need**

What is the project about?

This project aims to improve the way that young people and families are supported when they experience family violence. We know that family violence can have great impacts on families and that sometimes families do not get the help that they need.

This project hopes to share families' experiences about how they are supported when they experience family violence, when one or more family members are separated from the family (either because a young person goes into out of home care or because a parent has spent time in prison or elsewhere), and when families come back together again (i.e., reunify) and help services and decision-makers better meet their needs.

Who is involved in the project?

This research project is being conducted by a number of researchers from University of South Australia and Curtin University (listed at the end of this information sheet), including Associate Professor Tim Moore. If you would like to talk to Tim about the project, you can contact him by phone on 0466 416 148 or email tim.moore@unisa.edu.au

What will my involvement in the project involve?

As a worker in the family domestic violence, child protection, or reunification sectors you are being asked to participate in a focus group of around 10-12 participants to discuss safety and reunification in the context of family domestic violence from the perspectives of your own or other organisations. Workers will be asked to discuss how client needs are assessed and met, and to identify any barriers that exist to providing appropriate services. Additionally, workers will be presented with findings from interviews with parents and young people who have engaged with the sector and will be asked to identify similarities and differences in families and workers views and discuss the implications of these for practice.

Participants will also be asked for their ideas on how systems and processes might be improved to enhance, or changes families experiences with services and improve levels of safety in reunification.

Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?

You will not have to answer any questions that you don't feel comfortable discussing. However, you may find it a bit uneasy or distressing to talk about your experiences of working with families who have experienced family violence or of having children separated from their care. The researchers will try to avoid this but, if you do feel uneasy or distressed, they will stop the focus group and talk with you about how best to support you and address what you are feeling. This may include helping you to find someone to talk to, including the following support services:

Service Name	Telephone	Website/ Email
1800RESPECT (24 hours)	1800 737 732	www.1800respect.org.au
Lifeline Australia (24 hours)	13 11 14	www.lifeline.org.au
Kids Helpline (24 hour help for parents)	1800 55 1800	www.kidshelpline.com.au
UniSA Psychology Clinic	(08) 8302 4875	psychologyclinic@unisa.edu.au
Nunkuwarrin Yunti (South Australia)	(08) 8406 1600	nunku.org.au
YORGUM (Western Australia)	(08) 9218 9477	www.yorgum.org.au

Can I withdraw from the project?

Participation in this project is completely voluntary and it is your choice whether you want to participate or not. If you agree to participate, it is also up to you whether you complete the focus group or withdraw after starting. You can withdraw from the project at any time. If you decide to stop participating it is also up to you whether the things you have already shared can be used by the research team or whether they should be deleted.

What will happen to my information?

With your permission, we will audio-record your interview so that we have an accurate record of what you have said. We will transcribe your responses and delete things that might make it easy for people to identify you (like your name, where you work, etc). The audio-recordings will be deleted and the transcripts will be kept for up to 7 years but will not include your name or other identifying details.

We will not tell people that you participated in the study or share with them anything you have said, except:

- If we are worried about your safety or the safety of someone else
- If you give us permission to share something

This project is about developing resources to help organisations help families who have experienced family violence and are reunifying after family separation. If you'd like to see these resources, please contact the researchers and we will send you details on how to find them. If a report is written, a summary of findings will be available on the Australian Centre for Child Protection's website (www.unisa.edu.au/childprotection) around July 2019 for you to freely access.

While the information you share during the focus group will be used in these publications, your individual responses are confidential and we will not publish anything that can identify you or what you shared.

What if I have a complaint or any concerns?

This project has been approved by the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee (Ethics Protocol reference number: 201387). If you have any ethical concerns about the project or questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Executive Officer of this Committee, Tel: +61 8 8302 3118; Email: vicki.allen@unisa.edu.au.

If you have questions or problems associated with the practical aspects of your participation in the project or wish to raise a concern or complaint about the project, you can contact the Chief Investigators Professor Fiona Arney or Professor Leah Bromfield by telephone on +61 8 8302 2904.

Yours sincerely,

The Research Team:

Professor Fiona Arney (UniSA)

Dr Fiona Buchanan (UniSA)

Professor Leah Bromfield (UniSA)

Dr Christina Fernandes (Curtin University)

Professor Donna Chung (Curtin University)

Dr Robyn Martin (Curtin University)

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Ms Samantha Parkinson (UniSA)

Associate Professor Tim Moore (UniSA)

Ms Hayley Wilson (UniSA)

Associate Professor Nicole Moulding (UniSA)

APPENDIX 2: FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE

Welcome	Introductions and Agreed Way of Working (nature and scope of research and focus group, issues of confidentiality, consent etc)
Discussion of concepts	<p>Small group exercise:</p> <p>Group is broken into two and define (1) reunification; and (2) safety from the perspective of FDV, CP, Family Support and corrections</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does safety mean to you in the context of your work with families affected by family and domestic violence (probe: for children, for offending/ non-offending parents, for families) • What does reunification mean to you in the context of your work with families affected by family and domestic violence (probe: for children, for offending/non-offending parents, for families) <p>The two groups then swap topics and build on / modify the definition drawn from the other group</p>
Improving Safety	<p>Small group discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is reunification always safe for families? • When is it safe for families to reunify? • When is it unsafe for families to reunify? • How do you determine whether it is (un)safe for a family to reunify?
Input (short presentation)	<p>Discussion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups provided with a summary of working definition developed from interviews with young people and parents • How are these similar or different to the way that you as workers define safety and reunification? • How might safety and reunification be defined to take into account these differing views (i.e. Of workers, and families)
	OPTION: Small groups present main discussion points and definitions to the large group
	<p>Discussion:</p> <p>How does your service/sector consider and enable safety in your work with children / young people / parents / families?</p> <p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the way that you recruit clients • In the relationships fostered between workers and clients • In the way that you assess clients

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the way that you plan supports for clients • In the way that you exit clients • In the way that you work with other organisations
	<p>Discussion: What restricts children / young people / parent /family safety?</p> <p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In how your families operate (the way they interact, the choices they make, their attitudes, their circumstances) • In what you are able to do • In the way that you work with other organisations • In the way that the service system operates <p><i>Probes:</i> (in relation to funding and resources, program goals, timeliness and timeframes, client group, legal, ethical)</p>
INPUT:	<p>Short presentation</p> <p>Findings from the interviews with young people and families on what fosters and restricts safety are presented to the group for consideration</p> <p>Discussion: what are the differences, similarities between worker and family's views and what are the implications for practice?</p>
	<p>Discussion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In an optimal system, how might safety be enabled through the reunification process • What would need to be enhanced, added or change to improve clients (children, young people's, parents or families) safety through reunification <p>Small group exercise:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there examples of better practice in enabling safety through reunification? • What are the underpinning practice principles / approaches inherent in these practices?
Concluding	<p>From your perspective and from what you've heard today, what are the key skills, practices or approaches that services working with families affected by FDV need to implement to enable safe reunification?</p>

