

## Partnering in Family Preservation

Partnering is a cornerstone of keeping kids safe in the Permanency Support Program (PSP). Working in partnership with a child or young person (child), their parents, kin, and family network; services and professionals, including the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), will lead to better decisions, a shared understanding of risk, and more meaningful change.

The benefits of partnering

- it empowers the family to partner with us to create change
- it builds a support network around the child to share a vision and goals
- it supports everyone to share knowledge, expertise and resources
- it increases the quality of case planning
- it leads to better decision making
- it reduces any duplication in services
- it supports better management of limited resources
- it facilitates flexibility and the ability to “think outside the square”
- it provides opportunities for different perspectives and new ideas for working effectively with a family.

### Partnering Requires Collaboration

To collaborate successfully, you will need to cultivate relationships based on honesty, reliability, dignity, and hope. You will need to navigate forming meaningful connections while maintaining professional boundaries. Boundaries are crucial in family preservation work because they:

- set consistent limits for our clients
- protect against personal burnout
- help us identify insidious behaviours such as attempted grooming.

## What Does Collaboration Look Like?

Collaboration relies on you actively and skilfully helping the family to find, and work well with, the support needed to make and sustain changes. This is more than just a referral to a service; it means helping the family to find practical support.

If you role model how to share information, jointly plan and follow through, then the family will benefit from shared decision making and management of risks.

We know that one of the most important factors to achieving successful outcomes is effective relationships. With that in mind, it is important to value and support a family's connection with other professionals.

The research identifies 6 partnership principles that are crucial to successful collaboration:

1. recognising and accepting the need for partnership
2. developing clarity of purpose
3. making sure there is commitment and ownership
4. developing and maintaining trust
5. creating clear and robust roles and responsibilities
6. monitoring, measuring and learning.

## Developing Connections Through Collaboration

- Collaboration recognises the critical importance of the family's networks. Inevitably these networks extend far beyond formal interventions and are likely to play a vital role in a child or young person's life during times of crisis (Bromfield et.al, 2012).
- Collaboration with these people also increases the chances of a child developing connections with others to help counter loneliness, build safety, and support their sense of identity and belonging.

## Partnering with a Family

Perhaps the most important partnership in family preservation is the one between you and the family you are supporting. Partnering with a family means that you walk beside them, without judgment. Working in partnership with a family helps reduce the power imbalances that can lessen their dignity and impede honesty and connection. Working in ‘partnership’ may look different for each family that you work with, but is likely to include some of the following actions:

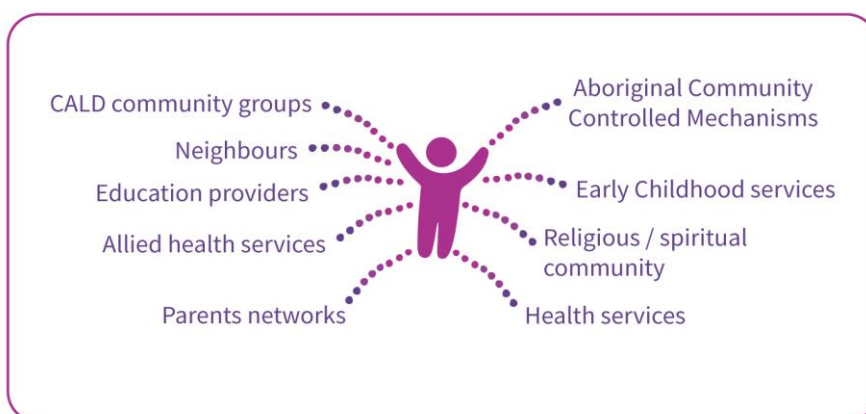
- Approach a family with an open mind. Check your own biases and assumptions about the family with your supervisor and/or colleagues. Ask them to challenge you about these. Challenge back when you feel that the focus on the child may be slipping.
- Spend time with each family member. Listen to their story and show them you understand what they are telling you.
- Ask each of the family members what they are worried about. What changes they would like to see in their lives? What hopes and goals they have for their future. From this information, you may use the [Family Action Plan for Change \(FAPFC\)](#) to establish some shared goals that can be used as the basis of your planning work. Alternately, create a [Family Action Plan](#) if the family does not have one.
- Find out who is important to the family and who is in their network. Ask the family's permission to speak to and involve those people in discussions and planning work.
- Ask the family how you can be most useful in helping them to make changes. What is the best use of other professionals and services? Give the family the choice in the people and services involved in their care.
- Acknowledge a parent's truth (even when it is different from facts in a referral).
- Create an environment where each family member feels safe to say how they feel and what they think will work for them.
- Honour that the family are the ‘experts’ in their own lives. Talk about what you see as their strengths. Check to see if they agree and what other strengths they feel they have that will help in the situation.
- Be clear about what is negotiable and non-negotiable. Make sure everyone clearly understands this including why some things aren't negotiable. Keep the child's safety and needs at the centre of all discussions

- Share information and learn from each other. Think about what each person needs to know to do their best work and give as much information as you can.
- Demonstrate that you are able to acknowledge mistakes in your own practice or the practice of other professionals that has negatively impacted the family.
- Celebrate positive progress toward goals.
- Be honest and refrain from judgement if and when there are setbacks.
- If there is disagreement or conflict, address it straight away. Name the conflict or point of difference. Talk about how it might impact on the family's progress and work together to find solutions.
- Hold unconditional positive regard for and belief in the family you are supporting.

A complicating factor in the child protection sector is the high level of staff movement, so we often ask a child and their family to build a relationship with a caseworker who may move on only months later. Care must be taken in the ending of a trusting relationship.

## Partnering with a Family's Support Networks

Most children and their families will have a network of people who care about them and are willing to be a support for change. A network may include grandparents, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, kin, neighbours, community members, school mums and dads, an early childhood nurse, a caseworker, a GP, a mental health specialist, an Elder, a priest, a teacher or police officer.



Many children will be from communities which have many people you could call upon for support. Talk with parents and children about who is in their network.

Some children and families may struggle to nominate anyone they would consider to be part of their support network. If this is the case, consider using the [Circles of Safety and Support tool](#) to help them think differently about who might be in their network. Parents are often surprised by the number of people they do have but may need your support to reach out to them.

Once you have established who is in a family's network, part of your role will be to help support and strengthen protective relationships. Consider involving key support people in a family's Family Action Plan for Change (FAPFC) meeting and actions. Consider using structured Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) at decision making times to maximise a family network's participation in decision making.

Family Group Conferencing (FGC) is DCJ's preferred ADR tool, but the family you work with may have a different preference, like mediation or Aboriginal Care Circles. Remember that a family has the right to decline an offer of ADR, even if you feel it would be helpful. For more information see [Alternative Dispute Resolution](#). If the family has a strong relationship with another service, you may get them involved to help. Think about building connections through [Family Connections and Networks - Overview](#).

## Harnessing Aboriginal Culture as a Protection and Strength

When working with an Aboriginal child and family, it's important to remember the impact of colonisation on Aboriginal people and the systematic dispossession of Aboriginal people of their land, children, identity, and culture by past government policies. Aboriginal children are 9.7 times more likely to be removed from their families and brought into out-of-home care (OOHC) than non-Aboriginal children. [Family Matters Report 2020 Snapshot](#).

It is vital to understand and harness the unique strengths of Aboriginal cultures and communities that can be drawn on to protect children.

## Ways Aboriginal Culture Can Protect Children

Aboriginal culture is a rich tapestry of community knowledge, the wisdom of Elders, and the guidance of spiritual and cultural practice and protocol. These strengths can be used by you to help build protection around a child — and the knock-on

consequences of trauma and family breakdown. Below is a brief look at some of the keyways you can tap into culture to help children overcome violence through community support.

## A Whole Community Can Be Drawn On

The concepts of extended family and ‘community as family’ in Aboriginal communities encompass the idea that children are not just the concern of the biological parents, but of the entire community. The raising, care, education and discipline of children are the responsibility of everyone — male, female, young and old. Aboriginal people have strong family values. Talk to the family to learn more about their feelings of community and how they feel their community can support them in their situation.

## Elders Provide Wisdom and Leadership

In many communities, Elders provide support and influence. In Aboriginal culture, Elders are an important, invaluable and intrinsic link spanning across time, where they are connected to the past, they exist in the present and they administer wisdom for the future.

## Cultural Practices, Protocols and Spirituality Support Healing and Parenting

‘A key characteristic of the collective Aboriginal community is to help the spirit of a child emerge as he or she grows and experiences life. This is done by letting the child know who they are in relation to their family, the broader society, the environment and the living spirits of their sacred ancestors and land’ — from [‘Growing up our way’](#) a SNAICC resource.

The [Aboriginal Case Management Policy \(ACMP\) Rules and Practice Guidance](#) outlines how PSP service providers and DCJ should work collaboratively with Aboriginal children, families, kin and communities. Specifically, the ACMP Rules and Practice Guidance aims to:

- Ensure the views of Aboriginal children and young people, family and extended family, as well as community and representative organisations are sought and documented.

- Acknowledge the interest of Aboriginal families and communities in the safety, welfare and wellbeing of their children, and genuinely engage with families and their communities in all decisions and interventions affecting Aboriginal children.
- Support family and community participation in decision making through Aboriginal family-led decision-making processes, and other similar approaches.
- Respect local Aboriginal community-controlled decision-making structures that enable Aboriginal families and communities to participate in decision making that affects the safety, wellbeing and care of their children.

## Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Families

When working with a child and family from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background you need to be aware of the particular barriers to accessing services and engaging a child's network. These include language barriers, cultural norms, fear of authorities and culturally inappropriate service delivery (Sawrikar & Katz 2008).

If a CALD child and family are also newly arrived migrants or refugees, they are likely to have experienced trauma in and prior to their journey to Australia and may be suffering grief and loss for the family, culture, places and pets left behind.

## Partnering with DCJ

In delivering PSP family preservation services, DCJ and PSP service providers need to work closely and collaboratively. Every family preservation package is co-allocated, with you as the PSP service provider holding primary case responsibility and DCJ holding secondary case responsibility.

Sometimes issues can arise when more than one agency is involved in supporting a family. To mitigate issues and enhance collaboration, it is crucial that everyone understands their unique and complimentary roles. For more information see [Roles and Responsibilities in Family Preservation](#).

There are also some useful tools to enhance collaboration between DCJ and PSP service providers to increase understanding and brainstorm solutions. This includes using a group reflective practice model such as a Group Supervision, consulting with the Permanency Coordinator, or bringing the case to a Community of Practice. For more information see [Overview of Casework Tools in Family Preservation](#).

It is important to understand that both DCJ and your PSP service provider want to establish and maintain positive professional collaborative relationships at all levels of service delivery. Senior executives in your agency will collaborate with DCJ in contracting meetings, PSP Program Managers will collaborate with DCJ and other agency counterparts at District Implementation Group Meetings (DIGS) or similar and it is expected that you will effectively collaborate with DCJ caseworkers and the Manager Casework.

At a caseworker level, collaboration means that you are responsive to each other's calls and emails, you update each other on a family's progress, you share risk in decision making and you see each other as colleagues with complimentary roles. If you experience challenges in your partnership with DCJ, it is important to escalate these to your manager so they can be resolved and it is expected that DCJ caseworkers will do the same as the work you do is critical to children and families.

For more information on building collaborative practice you can watch a 1 hour webinar [Collaborative Practice in Child and Family Welfare](#) developed by Emerging Minds (Australian Institute of Family Studies).

## Professional Boundaries

When supporting another person through intense and deeply personal times, it can become more difficult to maintain professional boundaries. Therefore, it's essential to understand boundaries, have strategies for maintaining your boundaries and regularly reflect (in supervision with your manager) on how successfully you are maintaining your boundaries.

Professional boundaries are the rules and limits that agencies and individuals set in a work-based relationship to protect both themselves and their client. Examples of a professional boundary include:

- Not discussing a client's private information with anyone except your manager or professionals who need to know.
- Keeping all discussions about a child or family dignified. For example, speaking about them as if they were in the room.
- Not connecting with clients via your personal social media.
- Not performing additional favours for clients, outside of the scope of your role.



Professional boundaries will be detailed in your agencies policies and code of conduct.

Personal boundaries are less explicit than professional boundaries but are equally important in protecting your psychological safety. Examples of personal boundaries include:

- Not discussing your personal problems with your clients, such as marital or financial issues. Some caseworkers will choose to share stories of their own personal child raising experiences in family preservation to give context and comfort to parents we are trying to support.
- Not developing feelings of attraction for your client or their family members.
- Not worrying about your client once your shift has ended.
- Not purchasing items for a client using your own money.

## Grooming

Collaborating or partnering with a family should happen as part of increasing safety and reducing risk. Sometimes this means you will need to assess if what a family tells you is happening matches what you and others observe. In a small percentage of cases, a parent may attempt to ‘groom’ you to deflect attention from their own behaviour.

‘Grooming’ is a term primarily used to describe a set of manipulative behaviours predators use against a child (and sometimes also their family) to gain sexual access to the child. Dr Jessica Taylor (2020) in her article ‘Why grooming is so hard to spot: The Truth’ argues that grooming is not specific to sexual offenses and or to children. Taylor defines grooming as ‘something that someone does to someone else to convince, persuade, manipulate or control them into doing something that they want them to do (either positively or negatively)’. She argues that grooming is happening constantly, and that you can be groomed into ‘a cult, terrorism, a political ideology, domestic abuse, a bullying culture, into taking drugs or drinking, into a religion, into changing your worldview, into thinking you’re mentally ill, into body dysmorphia or into hating yourself’ (Taylor 2020).

In any conversation about relationship building and collaboration, it is always important to consider power imbalances and grooming. In PSP we often talk about us as professionals holding more power than our clients, but there are a small number of parents we work with, who will use manipulative tactics to gain some control over us. This is grooming. You may see this in a parent who uses violence,

who may try to manipulate you into believing their gaslighting (a form of psychological manipulation in which a person or a group covertly sows seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or group, making them question their own memory, perception, or judgment) is fact. To develop your awareness of grooming, see [Dr Taylor's full article](#).

## Tips for Developing Meaningful Professional Relationships

There is no single strategy to develop meaningful professional relationships in PSP. Like all other relationships in life there are basic expectations of honesty, reliability, respect and trust. However, professional relationships in PSP go beyond this, as you carry the responsibility to find a way to connect despite potential resistance and fear.

The following factsheets provide information on key elements of relationship-building in PSP:

- [Relationship-Based Practice](#).
- [Dignity Driven Practice](#).
- [Overview of Casework Tools in Family Preservation](#).
- [Working with Families in Preservation and Restoration](#).

## References

The Family Matters Report 2018. Collaboratively published by SNAICC, University of Melbourne and Griffith University. <https://www.familymatters.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Family-Matters-Report-2018.pdf>

The Family Matters 2020 Snapshot. <https://www.familymatters.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/FamilyMatters2020SnapshotData.pdf>

Sawrikar & Katz (2008). 'Enhancing Family and Relationship Service accessibility and delivery to culturally and linguistically diverse families in Australia'. Australian Institute of Family Studies. <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/enhancing-family-and-relationship-service-accessibility-and/background>

Taylor, J. (30 June 2020). 'Why grooming is so hard to spot: The Truth'. <https://victimfocusblog.com/2020/06/30/dr-jessica-taylor-explains-the-real-reasons-why-you-cant-spot-grooming-behaviour/>