Emerging Principles of Engagement for Young Men Using Intimate Partner Violence

Responses and interventions for young men using intimate partner violence should:

Centre victim survivor safety:

- Provide immediate family violence support and service information to victim survivors.
- Prioritise victim survivor safety in all responses and interventions with young men who use intimate partner violence.

Meaningfully and safely engage with young men on their terms:

- Develop and tap into young men's existing capabilities and capacities, including the language they use and concepts that resonate with them.
- Build on young men's existing protective factors and networks of support.
- Provide psychosocial education for young men to improve their understanding of the drivers, nature, and impacts of intimate partner violence.
- Create safe and respectful spaces, free from stigma, judgement and bias.

Establish youth friendly and relatable settings of engagement:

- Establish settings that are welcoming, accessible and adapted to the times and spaces that young people engage in.
- Embed family violence intervention specialists within services already interacting with young people.
- Aim for integrated, multi-agency approaches and 'one-stop shops'.
- Deliver age-appropriate interventions that account for the social, emotional and situational contexts of young men.
- Enable responses and interventions that are individualised, relatable and tailored, and acknowledge the intersectional contexts of the young men.
- If possible, centre peer, lived or cultural experience and embed workers that young people can relate to.

Create pathways to behaviour change. Services that engage with young men who use intimate partner violence should:

- Have sufficient time and service capacity for building rapport and trust with young men who use intimate partner violence.
- Provide wrap around services to respond to individual co-occurring needs such as mental health, harmful alcohol and other drug use, concurrent experience of family violence as a victim survivor and housing/homelessness risks.
- Adopt a strength-based, non-judgemental approach to build self-esteem and confidence. This could include group and individual engagement such as:
  - Adventure-based therapeutic approaches and other structured group activities to promote self-efficacy and skills development.
  - Trauma-informed one-on-one therapeutic practices that recognise and respond to trauma histories and victimisation.

Based on project reported in research report:
Nicholas, L. Hanckel, B. Burgin, R. Kilvington-Dowd, L. Johnston, B. Mills, X. & McGregor, J. (2025). *Improving responses to young men's use of intimate partner violence: Towards a best practice approach*. Western Sydney University. DOI https://doi.org/10.26183/0rct-m487

This project was supported by the Victorian Government.

Intimate partner violence (IPV)

If you are in immediate danger, call **Triple Zero (000)**

What is IPV?

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Control

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is physical, sexual or emotional abuse or control that happens between two people that are dating or in a relationship.

IPV might look like...

- Blaming a partner for something that isn't their fault
- Using apps or phones to track a partner's movements without their consent
- Using behaviours to frighten or intimidate a partner, like driving dangerously or breaking or damaging objects
- Controlling a partner's money or spending
- Threatening a partner or the people and pets the partner cares about
- Sharing sexual or intimate images of a partner without their consent
- Calling a partner names or putting them down

Support services

It is important that young people feel safe and don't use or experience intimate partner violence. Sometimes it can feel difficult to reach out for support. **Change is possible and there are services and programs to help you.**

If you would like to talk to someone about seeking help, the below services can assist:

18+ years

If you are concerned about your behaviour and over 18, contact:

Men's Referral Service
call **1300 766 491**

Under 18 years

If you are concerned about anything and under 18, contact:

Kidshelpline
call **1800 55 1800**

Everyone

Support for people impacted by domestic, family or sexual violence, contact:

1800RESPECT
call **1800 737 732** txt **0458 737 732**

Based on project reported in research report: Nicholas, L. Hanckel, B. Burgin, R. Kilvington-Dowd, L. Johnston, B. Mills, X. & McGregor, J. (2025). *Improving responses to young men's use of intimate partner violence: Towards a best practice approach.* Western Sydney University. DOI https://doi.org/10.26183/0rct-m487
This project was supported by the Victorian Government.

Safe Steps

Seeking help in their own right

Young victim-survivors' experiences of family violence crisis responses in Victoria

Dr Kate Fitz-Gibbon

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of country

We acknowledge the true and ongoing custodians of the unceded lands on which we meet and conduct our research. The team involved in this project work across Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri Country. We pay respect to Elders of these lands past and present. These always were and always will be Aboriginal lands.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the children and young people who generously shared their experiences, insights, and reflections for this study. This research would not have been possible without your courage, honesty, and vision for change, which form the heart of this report.

I also express my appreciation to the service providers and frontline practitioners who supported the recruitment process by facilitating connections with young victim-survivors. Your assistance was vital in ensuring that the voices of young victim-survivors were heard and centred in this work.

This project draws in part on data from the I Believe You project (2023). I would like to acknowledge with appreciation my co-authors on that study – Dr Jasmine McGowan and Dr Rebecca Stewart.

This study was funded by Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre.

Dr Kate Fitz-Gibbon led this project in her capacity as a Principal Consultant with Sequre Consulting. This work is wholly independent of Kate Fitz-Gibbon's role as Chair of Respect Victoria and membership on the Victorian Children's Council.

Suggested citation

Fitz-Gibbon, K. (2025) Seeking help in their own right: Young victim-survivors' experiences of family violence crisis responses in Victoria. Final Report. Sequre Consulting and Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre, Victoria, Australia. DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.29242661

Table of Contents

Acronyms

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AHURI	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
CCYP	Commission for Children and Young People
DFFH	Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
DFV	Domestic and Family Violence
DHS	Department of Human Services
DSS	Department of Social Services
MCM	Melbourne City Mission
RCFV	Royal Commission into Family Violence

Executive Summary

Children and young people experiencing family violence in Victoria face significant barriers in accessing crisis supports when and where they need them.

Despite the substantial reform agenda that has been progressed in the nearly ten years since the Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV, 2016), the family violence service system in Victoria remains predominantly adult-centric and often fails to recognise young people as victim-survivors in their own right. Critical gaps persist in ensuring young people - particularly unaccompanied minors - can access safe housing, specialist support services, and clear pathways that support their stability, healing and recovery.

This study seeks to respond in part to these gaps by centring the voices and experiences of young family violence victim-survivors in Victoria. It builds on growing national recognition of the need for youth-specific, trauma-informed responses for children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, as articulated in the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 (Department of Social Services, 2022; see also Fitz-Gibbon, 2025). By drawing directly on the lived experiences of young family violence victim-survivors, this report identifies opportunities to create a more inclusive, coordinated, and youth-centred family violence response system in Victoria.

This study

This study explores how young victim-survivors in Victoria experience and navigate the crisis support system when escaping family violence. It was designed using a trauma-informed, child-centred research framework and comprised three phases: a desktop mapping of existing services; stakeholder workshops with Victorian practice and service delivery experts; and in-depth interviews with young people aged 16 to 25 years old with lived experience of family violence and seeking help in Victoria. Specifically, 20 interviews with young victim-survivors have informed the findings, including 11 interviews conducted specifically for this study and 9 drawn from a previous Victorian Government-funded project (the 'I Believe You' project, Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023). While the number of interviews undertaken is significant in that there remain relatively few qualitative research studies in Australia that draw directly on the views of young victim-survivors of domestic and family violence, it is noted that this is a small-scale qualitative study. The findings presented reflect the experiences of the victim-survivors who participated in the two research studies drawn upon, and as such, it is not purported that they reflect the experiences of all young people who have experienced family violence and sought help in Victoria.

Key findings

Information gaps and delayed attempts at seeking help.

Young victim-survivors described growing up without a clear understanding of the range of abusive behaviours that constitute family violence. Without foundational knowledge about violence or available services, help-seeking was severely hampered and often delayed. Many young people only recognised their experiences as abuse when they were well into adolescence or early adulthood - often through chance conversations or by conducting their own research.

Navigating adult-centric services is overwhelming and isolating for young victim-survivors.

Young victim-survivors consistently reported that the services they accessed when in crisis appeared to be designed for adults, and did not cater to the needs and experiences of young people. Information was not age-appropriate, service entry points assumed parental accompaniment, and eligibility criteria often excluded unaccompanied youth.

A pervasive sense of invisibility and mistrust characterises young people's experiences of seeking help at the point of crisis.

Isolation, both physical and emotional, was a defining feature of many young people's experiences of family violence and their help-seeking journey. Young victim-survivors consistently described growing up without trusted adults to confide in, a factor compounded by past betrayals that eroded their ability to trust others, including the very systems intended to protect them. This pervasive sense of isolation and mistrust presented major barriers to accessing crisis supports at critical moments in their journey to seek help and safety.

Crisis-driven response systems leave young people unsupported until the point of crisis.

Many young victim-survivors described making — or having made on their behalf — repeated, unanswered reports to child protection and other crisis responses services. Effective intervention often only occurred after significant escalation of the risk and harm faced by the young person - such as experiencing homelessness, parental incarceration, or serious injury. Young people frequently recounted experiences where earlier opportunities for prevention and intervention were missed.

Out-of-home care placements often compound trauma.

For those young people who had been removed from unsafe homes, they explained that care placements often introduced new layers of trauma. Instability, sibling separation, and unsafe residential care environments deepened some young victim-survivors' feelings of abandonment and reinforced their distrust of the system.

Schools are missing opportunities to provide early interventions.

Disrupted engagement in education was common for young victim-survivors who participated in this research. Young people often described school experiences where trusted adults had been unable to respond effectively to their disclosed experience of violence. There was an often-shared perception that schools were missing opportunities to provide early intervention and to improve safety for young people. While some individual teachers made a difference in the lives of individual young victim-survivors, positive support was the exception rather than the norm. School-based education about family violence, respectful relationships, and help-seeking was described by young people interviewed as infrequent, superficial, or absent.

Looking forward

Despite their own experiences of system shortcomings and recognised challenges in the current crisis support system for children and young people experiencing family violence, throughout the interviews young victim-survivors shared their vision on how crisis system responses could be improved.

Identified opportunities to enhance responses for young people experiencing family violence include:

Earlier intervention	Young people need access to supports before reaching the point of crisis. Schools must be better resourced and trained to provide family violence-informed responses and should be connected with the broader service system to act as trusted, trauma-informed entry points for disclosure and early intervention.
Improved workforce capacity	Youth-specialist workers should be embedded in education systems. Beyond schools, specifically, frontline workers engaging frequently with young people across social service systems should be trained in family violence-informed, youth-centred, and culturally safe practices.
Coordinated care pathways	Stronger partnerships between youth services, family violence specialist services, and other frontline sectors are needed to ensure continuity of care and effective support as young people navigate multiple systems to seek help for their often-intersecting needs.
Independent access to supports	There is a need to ensure young victim-survivors of family violence can access financial, housing, and other supports without requiring parental consent in circumstances where it is unsafe or inappropriate to gain that consent.
Technology-enabled information	Family violence and youth services should leverage the social media platforms and online spaces young people trust and frequent to deliver accessible and engaging help-seeking information. Such information should be made available in formats and language that is child-centred and trauma informed.
Self-assessment tools	Young victim-survivors see value in developing tools and resources to support them to better recognise unsafe situations, to name their experiences of family violence, and to identify safe pathways to crisis support services.
Youth-centred system design	Systems must embed the voices and lived experiences of young people in the design of service responses, eligibility criteria, and crisis pathways to ensure the needs of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right are reflected in practice, including in systems design and the delivery of crisis services.

Throughout both the studies upon which this report draws, young victim-survivors demonstrated remarkable clarity in identifying both what failed them in their own experiences of seeking help and what could make a meaningful difference in improving safety and healing outcomes for young people who have experienced family violence. Recognising young people as victim-survivors in their own right demands more than rhetorical commitments. It requires tangible, structural change in how governments design, fund, and deliver crisis responses for young people who experience family violence. This report seeks to contribute new evidence on how that may be achieved in policy and practice.

Introduction

Young people experiencing and escaping family violence in Victoria face significant barriers to accessing specialist family violence crisis support services. The existing response system remains fragmented, adult-centric, and often inaccessible to young victim-survivors, particularly unaccompanied minors.

While the broader family violence system has undergone substantial reforms following the Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV, 2016), there remains a critical gap in youth-specific crisis supports that recognise young people as victim-survivors in their own right. Addressing these gaps requires a coordinated, youth-centred approach that ensures young people experiencing and escaping family violence can access safe housing, specialist support services, and pathways to support long-term safety, stability, healing and recovery.

In recent years, there has been increasing national and state-level recognition of the need to better respond to children and young people as victim-survivors of domestic, family, and sexual violence in their own right. The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 (Department of Social Services, DSS, 2022) acknowledges that children are not simply witnesses to violence but experience its impacts directly - with profound implications for their lifelong safety, wellbeing, and development. More recently, the Australian Government's Rapid Review, 'Unlocking the Prevention Potential' (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024), highlighted longstanding gaps in services for children and young people while noting that, historically, systems have been designed with adults as the default client group. The Rapid Review called for significant reform to create age-appropriate, trauma-informed, and culturally safe responses for young people experiencing violence, including those impacted by child sexual abuse, family violence, and violence within intimate relationships.

The need for urgent action is underscored by findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS), which revealed that nearly two-thirds of Australians reported experiencing some form of maltreatment during childhood (Mathews et al., 2023, see also Fitz-Gibbon & Meyer, 2023). Experiences of domestic and family violence (DFV) were particularly common, with emotional, psychological, and physical abuse by caregivers, and experiences of interparental violence, widely reported among the sample surveyed. Specifically, the ACMS identified that 39.6 per cent of participants had experienced exposure to DFV before the age of 18 years (Matthews et al., 2023), and that exposure to DFV was the most common form of maltreatment to occur for children and young people (up to the age of 18 years old) experiencing two or more types of abuse (Higgins et al., 2023). Research establishes that exposure and direct experience are paralleled when it comes to traumatic impact on children and young people (see, among others, Broady & Gray, 2018). As articulated by Broady and Gray (2018: 190), 'Children do not passively observe violent behaviour but, rather, actively experience abusive environments,' with those who experience DFV (directed at them or another family member) nine times more likely to use violence later in life (Bastian et al., 2023, see also Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022).

The ACMS also highlighted the gendered nature of harm, with girls at higher risk of sexual violence victimisation in childhood (Mathews et al., 2023). The study also confirmed the disproportionately high risk experienced by First Nations children, children with disabilities, and children from culturally and linguistically diverse communities (Mathews et al., 2023). The enduring impacts of these experiences across the life course - including mental health issues, substance use, and socioeconomic disadvantage - reinforce the imperative for early, sustained, and trauma-informed interventions across the Australian community.

Research focused specifically on children and young people's experiences of family violence in Australia remains limited but growing. In 2022, the 'I Believe You' study documented the help-seeking journeys of 17 children and young people with lived experience of family violence in Victoria (Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2022). Participants in that study described systemic failures to meet their needs, with recurring calls to improve system navigation, develop child-centred spaces, and embed age-appropriate, individualised supports. More recently, the 'Unseen and Unheard' report by the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People (Connolly, 2024) and the 'Silence and Inaction' report (Fitz-Gibbon, 2025) echoed similar concerns, highlighting

the need for significant policy and practice reform across system responses to effectively deliver upon the commitment to respond to children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right. However, despite growing awareness of its value and importance to informing reform, Australian research centring the voices of young victim-survivors remains relatively scarce. Recent work by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS, 2020) affirms that meaningful participation of children and young people is vital to shaping effective policy and practice responses.

This study builds on these growing bodies of evidence by focusing specifically on the crisis response system for young people experiencing and escaping family violence in Victoria. It draws directly on the voices and experiences of young victim-survivors to identify critical opportunities for reform, and to chart a path towards a more inclusive, youth-centred response system for young family violence victim-survivors.

This study

Focusing specifically on young people's experiences of accessing supports at the point of crisis, this project aims to:

1. Map existing services available for, and accessed by, young people when escaping family violence

2. Build the evidence base of young people's experiences of accessing crisis supports in Victoria, mapped from the perspective of the young people interviewed

3. Better understand what is needed to redesign and improve the capacity of the family violence service system to meet the needs of young people experiencing and escaping family violence

The outcomes from this project align with the Victorian Government's ongoing family violence policy priorities, including the final Rolling Action Plan (Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, DFFH, 2025). These outcomes also align with stated Federal Government priorities under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 (DSS, 2022), including the recognition of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right (see also Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024).

Study design

The aim of this research is to better understand how young people experiencing and escaping family violence in Victoria access help at the point of crisis. In order to do this, data was collected across three key stages, as shown in the figure below. From the outset, the project was framed by a commitment to trauma-informed and child-centred research practice. It was designed to ensure meaningful engagement with young people while prioritising safety, agency, and support throughout the research process.

Figure: Stages of data collection

In the following section each of these stages of data collection is detailed.

Stage 1: Desktop mapping

In the first phase of this study, an exploratory desktop mapping exercise was undertaken to identify and document current service system responses to children and young people experiencing and escaping family violence in Victoria. Recognising that childhood experiences of family violence increase a young person's risk of poor mental health, suicide, disengagement from school, disability and other chronic health problems, the desktop mapping took a wide view in terms of relevant services to be included, for example: children and family services, housing, mental health, child protection and wellbeing, family violence, youth services, and child-centred interventions. Where possible, this desktop mapping exercise identified service availability, accessibility and inclusivity across points of the system. The results of this desktop mapping exercise are depicted in the 'Current system map: the system's perspective' graphic on the following page.

Stage 2: Stakeholder workshops

In the second stage of this study, a series of stakeholder workshops were convened remotely in November-December 2024. Workshops were varied in size, with some involving small focus groups and others, due to scheduling conflicts with the group sessions, involving one-on-one discussions between the stakeholder and research lead. The workshops brought together 12 Victorian and national policy experts, frontline practitioners, and service providers to discuss and gather professional views on young people's experiences of accessing crisis support for family violence in Victoria. The workshop discussions were focused on:

- **mapping existing service pathways,**
- **identifying systemic barriers, and**
- **co-developing suggestions to improve responses for young people experiencing family violence.**

All stakeholders involved in the workshops were invited to share any additional policy and practice resources relevant to the project scope to inform wider context and next steps.

Current system map: the system's perspective

Based on the current mapping of systems, service reviews and providers, there are a number of disparate services technically available to young people.

Stage 3: Interviews with young victim-survivors of family violence

In the third – and most substantive - stage of the project, in-depth interviews were conducted with young people aged 15 to 24 years old who have experience of escaping family violence and seeking access to crisis supports in Victoria. The interviews had four key purposes:

1. To understand young people's experiences of accessing crisis support in Victoria when escaping family violence, including where they sought help, what barriers to access they encountered, and what range of services they sought to access.
2. To better understand, from the young person's perspective, how systems respond, at the point of crisis, to a young person as a victim-survivor in their own right.
3. To gain insights into how technology solutions could be harnessed to enhance service accessibility and delivery.
4. To identify commonalities and differences among the experiences of young people accessing crisis supports alone and those who seek help with a protective parent.

Interview participants were recruited via Safe Steps, other Victorian-based family violence services, youth services organisations, and established Victorian youth advisory groups and networks. This approach to recruitment ensured that all participants had pre-existing relationships with support organisations. In line with best practice, the study was designed in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research[1], with safeguards in place to minimise distress for the young people during and following their participation in an interview.

This recruitment approach resulted in the completion of 11 in-depth interviews with young people aged 18 to 24 years. Interviews were conducted online (via Zoom) or by phone, depending on the preference of each participant. Interviews ranged in length between 25 minutes and 90 minutes, and were all conducted by Dr Kate Fitz-Gibbon. All interviews were voluntary and participants were supported to skip any questions that were not relevant to them or they didn't feel comfortable answering, to pause at any time for a wellbeing break, or to end the interview at any time. Following the completion of each interview, all interview participants received a $100 gift card in recognition of their time and sharing their lived experience.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed in full. Through this process each individual transcript was de-identified and each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Victim-survivors are referred to by this pseudonym throughout this report and any identifying information has been removed.

To complement this interview data set, and to maximise the breadth of young people's experiences informing this report, interview data from the 'I Believe You' study is also drawn on (for full project details, see Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan and Stewart, 2023[2]). The 'I Believe You' study involved in-depth interviews conducted with Victorian children and young people, aged 10 to 25 years, with lived experience of family violence. A secondary analysis of that interview data revealed 9 interview participants who both fell within the age range of this research (15 to 25 years) and had spoken specifically about the themes under its focus. In particular, they detailed their experience of accessing crisis supports in Victoria when escaping family violence[3], including where they sought help, what barriers to access they encountered, and what range of services they sought to access. The transcripts from the in-depth interviews with these 9 young people were incorporated into the project data set, bringing to 20 the total number of interviews with young people who have experienced family violence and sought help in Victoria informing this study.

[1] *Ethics approval for this project was obtained through the Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee.*

[2] *This project was funded by the Victorian Government in 2022–2023 as part of Child and Young Person Victim Survivor-focused Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM) practice guidance project.*

[3] *For a detailed outline of the methodology utilised for these interviews please refer to Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan and Stewart, 2023, pages 9-14.*

Participant demographics

Interviews with 21 young people have informed this study. Basic demographic information about each of the young people was collected at the outset of each interview (current study) and at the conclusion of each interview (in the 'I Believe You' study). The ages of the participants interviewed are outlined in the table below.

Table: Age of participants interviewed

Years of age	25	24	23	22	21	20	19	18	17	16
Number of participants	2	1	1	3	2	5	1	3	1	1

13 young people interviewed identified as female, and three identified as male. Four participants identified as being gender diverse, including one interview participant who identified as transman, one as agender, and two as non-binary.

Six interview participants indicated that they were from a migrant, refugee and/or culturally and linguistically diverse background, but all interview participants spoke English as their main language. One interview participant identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and one participant preferred not to answer this question.

Noting the impact that experiences of disability have on the risk of family violence and service and support needs (see further Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022a, 2022b), young people were asked to identify whether they had any disability. 11 interview participants identified as having a disability. The most common disabilities listed were attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism. One participant preferred not to answer this question.

The current living situations of the young people interviewed varied significantly. At the time of interview, many participants were not living with their primary caregiver, and several had experienced recent transitions out of unsafe homes or foster care arrangements. Participants described living independently in youth housing or foyers[4], living with extended family and friends; and, as will be explored in this report, several of the young people interviewed had experienced periods of homelessness and housing instability after escaping domestic, family or sexual violence.

Data analysis

The in-depth qualitative nature of the interviews undertaken offers critical insights into how young victim-survivors understand, navigate, and experience crisis support systems following their experience of family violence victimisation. Thematic analysis was chosen as it allows for rich, nuanced interpretation of participants lived experiences, foregrounding their meaning-making (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Nowell, Norris, White and Moules, 2017). This approach is especially well-suited to research with children and young people, where capturing complexity, variation, and voice is essential. The inductive coding process enabled the emergence of themes grounded directly in the perspectives of young victim-survivors, ensuring that findings reflect their priorities and lived realities, rather than being constrained by pre-existing service or policy frameworks. The thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo qualitative data analysis, with themes developed inductively, guided by recurring patterns across the dataset.

While the number of interviews drawn upon throughout this report is significant in that there remain relatively few qualitative research studies in Australia that draw directly on the views of young victim-survivors of domestic and family violence, it is noted that this is a small-scale qualitative study. The findings presented throughout this report reflect the individual experiences of the victim-survivors who participated in the two studies drawn upon. It is not purported that these experiences are generalisable to the experiences of all young people who have experienced family violence and sought help in Victoria.

[4] *The Youth Foyer model is a housing model for young people, typically aged 16-25 years old, experiencing or at risk of homelessness (see further MacKenzie et al., 2020; The Foyer Foundation & Accenture, 2022).*


PEANUT
BUTTER

Stakeholder views on the adequacy of system responses for young victim-survivors

As noted in the study design section, to complement the desktop mapping undertaken in the first phase of the project, workshops were held with a small number (n=12) of Victorian policy experts, frontline practitioners, service providers and survivor advocates.

These workshops were undertaken to better understand professional views on the existence of, and young people's experiences of, accessing crisis supports in Victoria. Seven key themes emerged from these workshops, each of which is explored in turn throughout the following analysis section.

The lack of youth-specific family violence crisis services

Throughout the workshops there was shared acknowledgement among stakeholders that existing family violence crisis services are designed primarily for adults and are not appropriate for young victim-survivors. The negative impacts of this on young people were recognised by stakeholders, with one practitioner commenting:

> *There is no wraparound, specialised trauma-informed service for children and young people experiencing family violence. Foundationally, there is nothing … When children and young people access services designed by and for adults, they feel disempowered*
> *(Workshop 5)*

One of the other key challenges identified by stakeholders was that crisis response services in Victoria have been largely designed on the assumption that a protective parent is always present and seeking help alongside young people. For example, one stakeholder commented:

> *The system assumes there's always a protective parent involved. But what happens when there isn't?*
> *(Workshop 2)*

Related to this, there was consistent agreement that the lack of crisis service options for unaccompanied youth creates additional barriers for those independently seeking access to safety, housing and financial supports. One stakeholder described:

> *The gaps for unaccompanied young people are enormous – crisis responses simply don't account for them.*
> *(Workshop 4)*

Stakeholders noted that this gap in service provision also extends to housing, as discussed below. This has been well documented in recent years. Indeed, although it is now widely accepted that children must be recognised and responded to as victim-survivors of family violence in their own right, recognition of unaccompanied young people remains scarce in both policy and practice, particularly for those approaching the age where child protection and out-of-home-care is not a viable option (Melbourne City Mission (MCM) et al., 2024).

Given this recognised lack of youth-specific family violence crisis services, a recurring theme shared by professionals across the workshops was that there is no clear, consistent pathway for young people seeking family violence supports at the point of crisis. Many services do not have established referral relationships with family violence specialist organisations, leaving young people without access to suitable and timely services. Stakeholders stressed the need to create an integrated support system where youth services, family violence specialist services, and homelessness support agencies work collaboratively. For example, two stakeholders commented:

> *Youth services need to be working alongside family violence services, not instead of them.*
>
> *(Workshop 5)*

> *Partnership is imperative – family violence services must partner with youth homelessness services to ensure young people do not fall through the cracks.*
> *(Workshop 4)*

To address the recognised gaps in current service provision and accessibility, stakeholders strongly advocated for the development of a specialised, youth-focused family violence service that provides trauma-informed, age-appropriate support for young people experiencing and escaping violence.

Lack of safe and secure housing options

Numerous stakeholders pointed out that there is no dedicated family violence refuge model specifically tailored to meet young victim-survivor's needs in Victoria. As a result, housing and homelessness services have become the default option, but this is not a complete solution. This gap persists despite research demonstrating that escaping family violence is one of the primary risk factors for young people entering homelessness or being at risk of homelessness (see, among others, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, AHURI, 2017; Campo, 2015; Cooper, 2018; Corrie & Moore, 2021; Kalemba et al., 2022; MCM, 2024).

The negative impacts of this gap in current practice and service provision was readily acknowledged by stakeholders, two of whom, stated:

> *For 16 and 17-year-olds, they can't live safely at home, but they aren't in the child protection space. They are left with nowhere to go.*
> *(Workshop 4)*

> *We have 17-year-olds sleeping rough because there is nowhere for them to go that will take them without a parent or guardian.*
> *(Workshop 3)*

Stakeholders repeatedly emphasised that young victim-survivors should not have to rely on homelessness services because family violence-specific housing does not exist for them. This viewpoint aligns with that of Corrie and Moore (2021) who, in their report examining the intersection of young people and DFV, stated:

> *Most child protection and family services are not designed or resourced to work with young people over 15. The only service available to these young people are youth and homelessness services, neither of which are designed to manage complex family violence risk.*
> *(Corrie & Moore, 2021: 9).*

With options for this age group being so limited, the default for many young victim-survivors is to enter the child protection system (MCM et al., 2024). That system, however, currently only provides support for young people under 18 years, with the process of transitioning to independent living commencing around 15 to 16 years (Commission for Children and Young People, CCYP, 2020). While this process is designed to support young people into independent living, in practice this cohort faces increased risk of becoming homeless and experiencing significant housing instability (CCYP, 2020). Additionally, the data indicates that medium- to long-term housing remains scarce for those seeking it through specialist homelessness services, and high rates of homelessness persist among young people exiting care arrangements (CCYP, 2020).

To remedy this, one stakeholder commented:

> *There is a need for dedicated housing for young people experiencing DFV and IPV. Youth-specific family violence refuges should mimic what is in the youth homelessness sector but with the specialisation of family violence.*
> *(Workshop 4)*

Stakeholders in the workshops recognised that multiple services and supports are needed to address the present gap in housing options for young victim-survivors who are unaccompanied. Looking to recent Australian research, it has been advanced that addressing these gaps requires an increased focus on transitional support, equipping young people with independent living skills and preparing them for stable housing outcomes (Alves & Roggenbuck, 2021; Corrie & Moore, 2021; MacKenzie et al., 2020). Additionally, researchers and advocates have called for a dedicated housing target for unaccompanied young people to be embedded within social housing policy reform and investment (MCM et al., 2024; Kalemba et al., 2022; Corrie & Moore, 2021).

Multiple stakeholders criticised the reliance on motels as emergency housing, particularly for young people escaping family violence. Stakeholders raised serious concerns about the safety, supervision, and negative impacts of the use of motels as a crisis response for youth escaping family violence. Reflecting on this, one stakeholder spoke to the importance of the spaces used to provide emergency housing themselves being trauma-informed. They explained:

> *There is a lot of trauma when you are in refuge, and if you feel like the place has no worth (unclean, messy, dirty), it just knocks you down further.*
> *(Workshop 4)*

Stakeholders also provided numerous examples where unaccompanied youth have been pushed into homelessness services that do not cater to their needs due to the lack of a youth-specific family violence refuge option. One stakeholder commented:

> *Unaccompanied minors experiencing family violence are forced into the youth homelessness sector because there is nowhere else for them to go.*
> *(Workshop 5)*

Stakeholders pointed out that young victim-survivors accessing youth homelessness services typically find that they are not equipped to address the trauma and safety risks of family violence victim-survivors. In addition, they noted that youth refuges lack the confidentiality and security of adult family violence refuges. It was stressed that the location of youth refuges is widely known, making them an often-unsafe option for victim-survivors who may be escaping a violent perpetrator. On this point, one stakeholder explained:

> *There is a huge gap in family violence refuge responses for young people because most refuges aren't built for confidentiality … Youth refuge addresses are known – not confidential like FV refuges. They do not have the security and protection built in to ensure safety of victim-survivors from perpetrators.*
> *(Workshop 4)*

One stakeholder explained that unaccompanied minors are often not eligible for crisis accommodation under eligibility policies currently in place across some services.

Due to the lack of youth-specific family violence services, young people are often diverted to homelessness services rather than family violence support. This was viewed as problematic. Two stakeholders explained:

> *The system doesn't know where to put young people experiencing family violence, so they just push them into youth homelessness services.*
> *(Workshop 5)*

> We need a proper pathway for young people … at the moment, they are either invisible or redirected elsewhere.
> *(Workshop 3)*

Stakeholders advocated for the establishment of youth-specific family violence refuges that provide confidential, secure, and trauma-informed accommodation. These refuges could be modelled on the youth homelessness sector but with specialised family violence support embedded, ensuring that young people receive safety-focused, age-appropriate crisis housing rather than being pushed into homelessness services that do not cater to their specific needs and vulnerabilities. Stakeholders also highlighted the need for policy reforms to remove eligibility barriers that prevent unaccompanied minors from accessing crisis accommodation, ensuring that 16- and 17-year-olds are not left without viable housing options.

Family violence services are not consistently accessible for young people

Stakeholders who participated in the workshops agreed that family violence service entry points are not consistently accessible nor suitable for young people, largely because they are typically designed for adult victim-survivors and their families. Reform of intake processes, service design, and referral pathways are critically needed to ensure that existing services and system entry points can better meet the safety and support needs of all family violence victim-survivors, including children and young people.

Stakeholders stressed that many young people perceive existing family violence services as not intended for them, leading to low engagement and poor service uptake among young victim-survivors. Stakeholders explained that young people seeking support via key family violence system entry points are often unable to self-refer or access services without an adult advocate. This creates significant barriers for unaccompanied youth, who may have no safe adult to assist them through the process. Anecdotally, one stakeholder remarked:

> *There are simply too many barriers to access.*
> *(Workshop 4)*

Across two of the workshops, stakeholders explained that many young victim-survivors fall through the cracks in the system for a perhaps surprising reason: if the young person doesn't answer their mobile when the family violence worker calls to follow up, their case can be closed. They stressed that this is a significant issue, given that young people in crisis often struggle to maintain phone contact due to their experiences of unstable housing, lack of credit/data, or fear of being overheard by the perpetrator(s). On this point, two stakeholders commented:

> *A young person in crisis is not going to be able to navigate multiple missed calls and voicemails – yet that's the expectation.*
> *(Workshop 3)*

> *We know young people reach out for help – but when they don't pick up, the case is closed.*
> *(Workshop 2)*

For those young people who do seek support via family violence specialist services, several stakeholders were of the view that the response provided is inconsistent. Stakeholders perceived that the quality of support offered is often dependent on the worker assigned to the case. Some, while being highly skilled in family violence responses, lacked expertise in working with youth. For example, one stakeholder commented:

> *It is very hit or miss – dependent on who the worker is that you get. They may be very specialised in family violence, but they are not specialised in the intersection of young people experiencing family violence.*
> *(Workshop 5)*

Stakeholders made numerous suggestions as to how services could be improved to better meet the needs of young people escaping family violence. Stakeholders emphasised the need for a dedicated youth intake stream within the family violence system, separate from adult victim-survivor responses. This would ensure that young people can engage with youth specialist workers who are training to understand and respond to their unique needs and risks. Many stakeholders also stressed that young people must be able to self-refer without requiring an adult advocate, as current processes create significant barriers for unaccompanied youth. To improve accessibility, stakeholders suggested introducing drop-in or outreach options, rather than relying solely on phone-based intake, which often leads to missed connections and case closures. Additionally, training for family violence practitioners was identified as essential, with calls for specialised education on adolescent development and trauma-informed engagement.

Beyond intake reforms, to prevent young people from falling out of touch with the support system, stakeholders suggested proactive and flexible follow-up mechanisms; these would also help ensure that cases are not closed simply because a young person misses a phone call. Implementing youth-friendly engagement strategies, such as text-based follow-ups and outreach workers, was suggested to maintain contact and build trust with young people escaping family violence.

Youth services may not meet the needs of young victim-survivors of family violence

Across the workshops, stakeholders repeatedly emphasised that youth services in Victoria are not often designed to support young people who have experienced and are escaping family violence. This can at times result in inappropriate referrals, the provision of inadequate support, and a failure to meet the complex needs of young victim-survivors. While youth homelessness and general youth services provide important supports for young people experiencing instability associated with homelessness, and with employment and mental health issues, they often lack the specialisation required to address the trauma, safety concerns, and legal complexities often associated with family violence victimisation.

Specifically, stakeholders highlighted that many youth workers and case managers do not have adequate training to respond to family violence dynamics. As a result, young victim-survivors are not appropriately identified, and their risk levels are often minimised or misunderstood. There is a critical need for family violence training across all youth services to ensure that workers can recognise signs of coercive control, identify high-risk cases, and provide trauma-informed support and referrals.

The inadequacy of child protection and social security systems

Stakeholders consistently highlighted that the child protection and legal system fails to provide adequate support for young people experiencing family violence, particularly those aged 16 and 17 years old. Stakeholders described this age group as falling into a dangerous gap - they are too old for the child protection system but not legally considered adults, meaning they lack independent access to essential support services. Stakeholders noted that these young people are often forced to remain in unsafe homes, rely on unstable informal networks, or enter the youth homelessness system, none of which provide the specialised support needed to safely escape and to recover from family violence.

Stakeholders said that one of the key barriers to safety for young people escaping family violence is the requirement for parental consent to access critical services such as financial assistance, housing, and healthcare. Even in cases where a young person is escaping violence perpetrated by both parents, they are often still required to seek parental approval to access Centrelink payments and other essential supports. This legal and procedural rigidity leaves many young people who have experienced and seek to escape family violence with no viable pathway to independence. One stakeholder described:

> *If the child is experiencing DFV from both parents, they still have to contact them to seek approval for Centrelink payments.*
> *(Workshop 5)*

Stakeholders called for urgent reforms to legal and child protection frameworks to address these gaps. Suggestions made included removing parental consent requirements for crisis support services, expanding financial assistance eligibility for unaccompanied minors, and improving pathways to secure housing.

Lack of awareness and information about available supports

A key challenge identified across the workshops was the significant lack of awareness among young people about the support services available to them when experiencing and escaping family violence. Stakeholders highlighted that many young people do not recognise their experiences as family violence, which prevents them from disclosing and seeking help in the first instance. Even when young people identify that they need support, they are often unaware of where to go, what services exist, or how to access them. One stakeholder commented:

> *There is still limited understanding among young people of what their options are when they feel unsafe.*
> *(Workshop 5)*

Stakeholders identified a key barrier to young people accessing support: the absence of a centralised, youth-friendly platform that provides clear and accessible information about crisis response services available, self-referral pathways, and young people's legal rights. Stakeholders noted that existing information is often complex, inconsistent across services, and designed for adults, making it particularly difficult for young people to navigate. One stakeholder remarked:

> *Young people don't know who to call or where to go – there is no single place that explains their options clearly.*
> *(Workshop 3)*

Stakeholders also raised concerns about the fear and mistrust young people feel towards engaging with specialist support services. Many young people worry about being disbelieved, facing legal repercussions, or experiencing unintended consequences (such as child protection involvement or being forced to return home). One stakeholder explained:

> *Even when young people know about services, they don't trust that they will be taken seriously or that it's safe to ask for help.*
> *(Workshop 4)*

To address these gaps, stakeholders suggested the development of a centralised, youth-friendly online platform that provides clear and accessible information on available services, crisis supports, self-referral options, and young people's legal rights. Stakeholders suggested that this platform be promoted in schools, across youth services, and via social media, ensuring that it is visible and accessible to young people.

Additionally, stakeholders emphasised the need for a state-wide education campaign to inform young people about family violence, crisis response options, and their rights. Schools should play a greater role in raising awareness, and specialist training should be provided to teachers and school staff to ensure they can appropriately respond to disclosures and provide appropriate referrals for young people experiencing family violence.

The role of schools

Schools were frequently mentioned across the workshops as one of the main settings where young people may disclose family violence victimisation. Yet stakeholders perceive that many schools lack clear referral pathways or do not have adequately trained staff to provide appropriate guidance. Stakeholders noted that when schools do not have well-defined processes for responding to disclosures, young people are often left without meaningful support, increasing their risk of further harm or disengagement from education. One stakeholder remarked:

> *The moment we talk about family violence in schools, it opens the floodgates – but then where do these young people go? … This difficulty for schools – they become the nucleus for everything.*
> *(Workshop 5)*

One stakeholder described how some alternative education settings have stronger models in place, where social workers are embedded in classrooms and available for immediate support. They believed that these alternative schools tend to have higher rates of disclosure because young people feel more supported and understood in an environment that normalises help-seeking and prioritises safety. However, this stakeholder emphasised that this model is not commonplace and that it needs to be expanded across all schools to ensure consistent and accessible support for young people at risk of and experiencing family violence.

Stakeholders emphasised the need for all schools to embed specialist family violence practitioners or social workers in all secondary schools. Having trained professionals available on-site would provide immediate, accessible support for students experiencing family violence, ensuring that young people have someone they can trust to guide them through the help-seeking process.

Stakeholders also stressed the importance of specialist training for teachers and school staff, so they can recognise the signs of family violence victimisation, respond appropriately to disclosures, and refer students to specialist services. Many young people first disclose their experiences at school, yet staff often lack the necessary training or confidence to handle these situations effectively. Strengthening professional development in this area would ensure that young people who disclose violence receive a compassionate and informed response.

In addition to improving school-based responses, clear and standardised referral pathways need to be established to connect schools with specialist family violence services. Many schools currently operate without formalised referral processes, making it difficult for students to access timely and appropriate support. Strengthening these connections would bridge the gap between education and crisis services, ensuring that students are not left to navigate the system on their own.

Suggestions on how to improve crisis responses for young victim-survivors

Throughout the workshops stakeholders offered numerous suggestions for how the system could be improved to be more accessible, and to better meet the needs of young people experiencing and escaping family violence.

There was a shared view across the workshops that the existing crisis support system for young people escaping family violence in Victoria is fragmented, adult-centric, and inaccessible for many young people. These suggestions outline various options which would support the creation of a youth-centred, trauma-informed, and accessible crisis response system for young people escaping family violence, including unaccompanied youth.

Stakeholder suggestions to improve current responses included:

1. Implement youth-specific pathways within the family violence system. Stakeholders suggested that a dedicated youth intake stream be established within the family violence system, separate from responses to adult victim-survivors. Stakeholders stressed that young people must be able to self-refer without needing an adult advocate.

2. Develop a centralised, youth-friendly information platform which contains readily accessible information on available services, self-referral pathways, crisis options, and legal information for young people experiencing and escaping family violence. This platform should be promoted in schools, across youth services and via social media platforms.

3. Increase awareness and information accessibility for young people. One stakeholder suggested the development and roll out of a statewide education campaign to inform young people about crisis supports available, and to ensure they know their rights and the options available to them when seeking help from family violence. This stakeholder stressed that services need to provide information that is clear and developmentally appropriate for youth clients.

4. Establish dedicated family violence crisis services for young people, separate from adult services. In particular, numerous stakeholders discussed the need for youth-specific family violence refuges. It was suggested that these could be modelled on youth homelessness refuges but with additional security, trauma-informed case management, and family violence specialisation embedded in them.

   In addition to youth-specific family violence refuges, several stakeholders highlighted the need for a tailored crisis response service for young people escaping family violence in Victoria. Stakeholders described the need for a service which provides a trauma-informed and age-appropriate response for 15- to 24-year-olds experiencing and escaping family violence. Stakeholders emphasised that practitioners working in the service would need to receive specialist training, and that they would need to be skilled in building trust and working effectively with unaccompanied minors who have experienced trauma. Some stakeholders stressed the need for such a service to be inclusive, noting that it should provide support for all genders, including young males.

   One stakeholder also spoke to the importance of providing medium to long-term transitional housing options for young people who have experienced and escaped family violence, to prevent prolonged crisis accommodation stays.

5 Improve training for family violence practitioners to better recognise and respond to unaccompanied youth. As part of this, some stakeholders suggested that all family violence practitioners should receive training on adolescent development, including on the impacts of trauma on youth mental wellbeing and development.

6 Reform parental consent laws to allow young people to access financial and housing supports independently. One stakeholder spoke in detail about the need to reform consent laws to allow young people to access financial support independent of a parent/guardian. They noted that presently Centrelink payments, emergency financial assistance and housing applications all require parental consent, which can be prohibitive for young people escaping family violence. This stakeholder also suggested that Centrelink and legal aid services should introduce a priority stream for young people escaping family violence to increase accessibility and timeliness of service.

7 Enhance the role of schools in responding to disclosures, ensuring they have clear referral pathways and explore the opportunity to more consistently embed social workers or specialist family violence youth practitioners into schools. School staff should be trained to recognise family violence and to respond to disclosures. In addition, stakeholders suggested that schools should provide drop-in sessions and on-site confidential support in secondary schools to enhance service pathways for young people experiencing family violence. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of ensuring clear and accessible referral pathways from schools to specialist and youth services.

8 Strengthen partnerships between family violence and youth services. Several stakeholders suggested that opportunities be explored to strengthen partnerships between family violence and youth services. One option suggested is to develop joint protocols between schools, youth services and family violence specialists to improve early intervention.

While not directly related to the specific focus of this study, during one of the workshops there was a conversation on the need to address the misidentification of young male victim-survivors as perpetrators of family violence. It was noted that this can have significant impacts on young males' first point of contact with the crisis support system. Stakeholders stressed the need for police, the courts and some family violence services to implement additional training to improve responses to young victim-survivors, regardless of gender.

Key findings from children and young people

This section presents the findings from the interviews with children and young people. Reflecting the details provided in the study design (see above section) this section draws from the two data sets of interviews with Victorian children and young people who have experienced family violence and sought help in Victoria.

In spite of the existence of an extensive web of services, they remain unknown and inaccessible to young people, as depicted in the 'Seeking help: a young person's perspective' graphic overleaf.

The key findings are organised into six main sections:

These workshops were undertaken to better understand professional views on young people's experiences of accessing crisis supports in Victoria. Seven key themes emerged from these workshops, each of which is explored in turn throughout the following analysis section.

1 The barriers to seeking help

2 Feeling invisible in a system designed for and by adults

3 Missed opportunities for intervention

4 Seeking help at school

5 Looking forward

Direct quotes from the young victim-survivors interviewed are woven throughout this analysis to ensure that the lived experiences and voice of the young people that participated in these studies are centred.

Seeking help: a young person's perspective

In reality there are limited services available to young people. Many are inaccessible as entry points or are seen as irrelevant by the young people who need them.

1. The barriers to seeking help

I didn't know what services were out there … even when I was 19, I didn't know who to go to.
(Amy)

For young people experiencing family violence, accessing help at a point of crisis is often hindered by significant information gaps and systemic barriers. Specifically, interviews with young victim-survivors highlighted three key issues: limited understanding of what constitutes family violence, low awareness of available services, and challenges navigating entry points into the service system. These gaps resulted in confusion, fear, and isolation at critical moments when young people most needed support.

Limited understanding of what constitutes family violence

Several young people interviewed described growing up without the language or frameworks to readily recognise that what they were experiencing was family violence. Throughout the interviews young people recounted how normalised patterns of control, coercion, and abuse went unnamed for years - meaning that young people did not realise they could seek help. Amy commented:

> *I was, very, very isolated. My mother made sure that we didn't go to other people's houses or that no one came to ours. So, I didn't understand that what was going on under my roof was, you know, abnormal compared to other young people's lives.*
> *(Amy)*

Consistent with previous research (Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023), the young people interviewed spoke of lacking the language, frameworks or external comparisons needed to recognise abuse, and so they often normalised violence within the family home, or even saw it as their fault. As one young victim-survivor said:

> *I didn't have the words to explain it. I just thought that's what families were like.*

For many, it was only later - through education, disclosure, or supportive relationships - that they recognised their experiences constituted family violence. The relief for one young person when she realised what she had been experiencing was abuse is well captured in this short comment:

> *When I finally had the words, everything clicked. I wasn't crazy – it was control.*
> *(Andi)*

Without education about what healthy relationships look like or what constitutes violence, young people often internalised blame or minimised their experiences of abuse. As Hunter reflected:

> *I didn't really know much about like any of the supports … I didn't even know there was violence at that time.*
> *(Hunter)*

In addition to lamenting the need for earlier and greater information about what constitutes family violence, and how it may impact children and young people, a few of the young victim-survivors interviewed commented that they experienced abuse in an intimate partner relationship shortly after they escaped family violence. They felt that they lacked an understanding of the 'red flags' of abuse prior to commencing that relationship. It was notable that these relationships often involved a significant power imbalance between the person using violence and the young person who had recently escaped family violence. One young victim-survivor recalled:

> *Recently as well, within the last few years, I went through a family violence, domestic violence situation with a partner … I didn't know what services there were available to me. I didn't really know who to go and ask for help in that situation, and that was very hard and very isolating at that time, especially being 19 years of age at that time where I really, you know, I understand these things, and I'm going through it myself … I was in residential care facilities from probably the age of 14 to 17, and I met that man that I was with at maybe 16 in residential care.*
> *(Amy)*

Later in the interview Amy commented that, given her abusive upbringing, she often now finds herself drawn to abusers in dating relationships. She explained:

> *I tend to, like, draw myself to those types of people, just because that's like, what I was raised around. And it's like, normal for me.*
> *(Amy)*

These views mirror prior Australian-based research which has similarly found that childhood exposure to domestic and family violence is associated with increased vulnerability to re-victimisation in intimate relationships during adolescence and adulthood (Campo, 2015; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022; Fitz-Gibbon, 2025). Indeed, the impacts of childhood family violence often extended into young people's later intimate relationships. Participants similarly described struggling to trust others, distinguish healthy relationships from unsafe ones, and set boundaries - vulnerabilities rooted in their early experiences of coercion and control. As Sophie reflected:

> *When you grow up in it, it's hard to know what normal is. You just think toxic is normal.*
> *(Sophie)*

> *I ended up trusting the wrong people because it felt familiar*
> *(Amira)*

Young victim-survivors interviewed also described struggling to trust others, navigate boundaries, and distinguish between healthy and harmful relationship patterns, which they attributed to being a legacy of the trauma and control they experienced during childhood. Reflecting on these relationships several young victim-survivors identified the need for all young people to receive age-appropriate education about what constitutes 'healthy' relationships and how young people can safely navigate young dating relationships.

Limited awareness of services available

Even when young people interviewed recounted recognising that they were experiencing abuse and wanting to seek help, most had very limited knowledge of what services existed and were available to support them. As four young victim-survivors commented:

> *I was just like, someone, please help me.*
> *(Andi)*

> *At that point, I wasn't looking for support services, because I didn't know there was anything out there*
> *(Hunter)*

> *When I was younger, I didn't know what support[s] were around.*
> *(Tom)*

> *I didn't know what support even looked like. No one told me what was out there.*
> *(Sophie)*

Mirroring these views, Amy explained:

> *For me personally, I'd struggled [to find a service] … it wasn't there in my face, and I guess it's hard to put it in your face when not everyone's going through these things, but it was hard for me … I didn't really know of any solely family violence or domestic violence support services … anything that I could reach out to … I wish they were more accessible and more visible.*
> *(Amy)*

Those victim-survivors who actively sought information about services available to them often reflected on finding limited information (if any) on where they could report their victimisation, beyond the police. When asked why they thought this information was so challenging to find, one young victim-survivor commented:

> *When you are googling what to do, nothing comes up. People don't want to believe this happens to young people*
> *(Julie)*

Given the perceived lack of information available for children and young people, many young victim-survivors interviewed described relying on chance encounters with supportive adults or peers to disclose violence and seek support, rather than proactively accessing services. Similarly, previous research with young people impacted by family violence has found that disclosures often occurred informally and unpredictably - through chance encounters with adults or peers - rather than through clear service pathways (see, among others, Allnock & Miller, 2013; Fitz-Gibbon, 2025; Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023; Munro, 2001).

Experiences of lacking information were even more acute for a small number of the young people interviewed who grew up in a rural area in Victoria. One young boy, Tom, explained:

> *I didn't know that I could just call child protection. I didn't know what was around. I would just hope the police could do something.*
> *(Tom)*

Previous research has also found that young people in rural and regional communities face additional barriers to help-seeking, including geographic isolation, fears about confidentiality, and limited availability of specialist services (Campo, 2015; Campo & Commerford, 2016; Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023; Mendes, 2014; Wendt & Zannettino, 2015). The absence of accessible information meant that young people remained trapped in violent environments longer, missing critical opportunities for early intervention.

Participants also noted that when they did try to seek information online, service websites were often overwhelming or poorly designed for young users. Two young people remarked:

> *Service websites are just pages and pages. When you're in trauma, it's overwhelming.*
> *(Tom)*

> *How clunky a lot of the services' websites are … it's very overwhelming.*
> *(Andi)*

The harnessing of technology to support better outcomes for children and young people experiencing family violence is explored in latter sections of this report.

Challenges navigating entry points into the system

Even when young people did attempt to reach out, navigating the entry points into the system was confusing and fraught. Many young victim-survivors interviewed described experiences of being bounced between services, having to repeatedly retell their story, or being turned away because they did not meet rigid eligibility criteria. Consistent with previous research findings, young people described navigating a fragmented service landscape where they were often forced to retell their stories multiple times, relive trauma, and manage adult-centric systems not designed for their needs (Campo & Commerford, 2016; RCFV, 2016; Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023).

Young victim-survivors, like Caroline, highlighted the inconsistencies in child protection and crisis responses:

> *DHS came involved almost once a year … but no real action was taken unless it escalated to the extreme.*
> *(Caroline)*

Prior research has similarly found that system responses were often reactive rather than preventive, with real action frequently delayed until risk escalated to visible crisis points (Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023).

Many young people described services as invisible until they reached acute crisis points, such as homelessness or police involvement. Even when facing significant harm, participants often had no knowledge of where to turn or what help might be available. Hunter noted the reactive rather than preventive nature of the available supports:

> *Most people don't know about refuges or crisis supports until they're already homeless – and by then it's too late.*
> *(Hunter)*

What Hunter describes here was mirrored across numerous interviews, where young people described becoming homeless before accessing any services. This is well documented in relevant research, where family violence has been consistently identified as a major risk factor for first-time homelessness among young people (AHURI, 2017; Campo, 2015; Cooper, 2018; Kalemba et al., 2022). Reflecting this, the Melbourne City Mission's (MCM, 2024) Youth Homeless Snapshot found that among 177 young people aged 15 to 24 years old accessing MCM homelessness programs, 82 per cent (equating to 4 in 5) of these young people had grown up experiencing family violence. In addition, 54 per cent (equating to 1 in 2) were known to child protection services at the time of accessing services (MCM, 2024). Reflecting these trends and their own experiences, a consistent call came from the young victim-survivors interviewed: that services should be more visible, youth-friendly, and proactive in reaching and providing supports to young people before they reach the point of crisis, and face high risk of homelessness.

Absence of trusted adults

> *I didn't have a safe adult that I trusted.*
> *(Andi)*

For many of the young people interviewed, family violence was accompanied by profound emotional isolation. This is a well-documented tactic used by coercive and controlling abusers within the context of abusive adult intimate partner relationships (see, among others, Stark, 2007). There is limited research on how isolation, as a form of coercive control, manifests for children and young people. Several experiences of this form of abuse were provided by young people throughout the interviews. For example, one young person described:

> *By 15, I was cut off from basically all contact with the outside world. No phone, no friends … it was very isolating.*
> *(Caroline)*

Even when safe adults were present, many young people described developing protective strategies – withholding disclosure due to fear, shame, or learned mistrust – reflecting deep-seated impacts of trauma. One victim-survivor commented:

> *Mum didn't speak to anyone herself. She had no friends. She was very, very isolated, very paranoid … Mum was always very like, you know, you don't tell anyone what goes on in this house. Do you know? She made sure that our marks were covered if we had marks on us. She made sure that we didn't tell anyone anything. It was very like we lived a very like, secretive life.*
> *(Amy)*

Several participants described never having a reliable adult figure they could approach for support, safety, or guidance. In some cases, adults who should have been protective – parents, teachers, and extended family members – were either the person using violence or were viewed by the young person as complicit because of their silence or inaction. As Andi shared:

> *Even the lovely teachers I had … I still didn't feel safe enough to open up. I had protective walls up. You learned not to talk about it.*
> *(Andi)*

This lack of trusted adults meant that young people often navigated experiences of violence, fear, and crisis entirely alone – without access to early intervention or emotional support.

While the absence of trusted adults was a recurring theme across the interviews there was a small number of examples from young victim-survivors of the impact when adults did intervene and offered meaningful support to young people, even if only briefly. Young people often pinpointed these relationships as offering moments of hope and change, and they reflected on the positive impact on their own wellbeing of knowing that someone cared for them and believed in them. For example, when Julie was seven years old and was interviewed at a police station following her father's arrest, she reflected on the attendance of a volunteer from the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, commenting:

> *[They] was the only person that was there solely for me … that was pretty cool.*
> *(Julie)*

Reflecting on an intervention in the school environment, Amy described the positive impact the high school mental health coordinator had on her:

> *The high school mental health coordinator – I still have contact with her to this day. Bless her, she was very involved in my situation with home and very like, knew a lot about what I was talking to her about it.*
> *(Amy)*

In another example of a positive connection, Tom described the impact a child protection worker had during his help-seeking journey:

> *Compared to other family services workers. She was really good, because most of them was just the typical come out to the house. The parent is acting fine right now, so they must be fine all the time, and then they'd leave, whereas, like I'd go away and have private meetings with her, and even my step mum would go away and have private meetings with her and with me, my step mum trying to escape it as well … I like that specific worker a lot, but most workers weren't as great.*

These examples echo earlier findings that consistent, authentic validation – even from a single adult – can have a profound and lasting impact on a young person's willingness to seek support and rebuild trust (Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023).

2. Feeling invisible in a system designed for and by adults

Every time I told someone, it felt like rolling the dice. Would they help, or would it make it worse?
(Sophie)

For young people escaping family violence, the service system was often experienced as largely invisible, inaccessible, and designed with adults - not children or young people - primarily in mind. Throughout the interviews, young victim-survivors repeatedly described feeling unseen within systems that either assumed parental accompaniment or failed to adapt to the realities of unaccompanied youth. This invisibility, coupled with adult-centric service models, created profound barriers to help-seeking, safety, and recovery for young victim-survivors.

Help-seeking via services designed for and by adults

When young people did seek help, they found themselves navigating systems primarily designed for adult victim-survivors. Many services, from crisis lines to housing supports, implicitly or explicitly prioritised adult users, leaving young people unsure if they were eligible, welcome, or understood. As one young victim-survivor described:

> *It felt like the system was for adults. Kids just had to survive however they could.*
> *(Zara)*

Even when looking for information remotely, young victim-survivors perceived that the system was designed with adults in mind. As Andi explained:

> *I started looking online... but everything was written for adults. It wasn't clear if it was for someone my age.*
> *(Andi)*

The lack of youth-specific design and outreach meant that even when motivated to seek help, young people often struggled to find entry points that felt accessible or appropriate. Reflecting specifically on seeking support after experiencing sexual violence, one young victim-survivor reflected:

> *There are sexual assault services for women, there aren't sexual assault services for young people. I didn't know what to do. You can google it but nothing comes up. So, I didn't do anything.*
> *(Julie)*

Mirroring this, another young person described that services felt 'adult focused' and that they didn't know whether they would be allowed to seek help without an accompanying parent. They remarked, 'It felt like services were for mums, not for me'. Without visible, youth-specific entry points, these findings highlight the risk that young people may feel excluded even when actively seeking help.

Barriers to seeking support for unaccompanied young people

Throughout the interviews, young people who sought help without a parent or guardian described facing additional layers of exclusion. Some young people recounted experiences of being turned away from services, facing long delays, or being treated with suspicion. There were several young people interviewed who believed their experience of accessing support was particularly challenging because they were doing so unaccompanied. This is consistent with prior research which has documented the risk of young people being turned away or left without clear pathways to support when seeking help without a parent (Corrie & Moore, 2021; Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023; Melbourne City Mission et al., 2024).

Julie, for example, described how youth services often felt invisible unless a parent was involved:

> *[I]t's like you don't exist unless you've got a parent with you.*
> *(Julie)*

Similarly, Hunter commented:

> *I didn't know there were refuges for people my age. I thought you had to be an adult or have kids to get help.*
> *(Hunter)*

These barriers left young people feeling abandoned by the very systems meant to protect them, reinforcing cycles of isolation and risk. Three other victim-survivors reflected:

> *Services didn't think I was old enough to need help on my own.*
> *(Zara)*

> When you're a teenager alone, no one knows what to do with you. You fall through every crack.
> *(Jayden)*

> Trying to get help without a parent was impossible. You're not treated seriously.
> *(Dylan)*

These barriers left young people feeling abandoned by the very systems meant to protect them, reinforcing cycles of isolation and risk.

Exclusion from decision-making processes

Even when young people did access services, they were often excluded from key decisions about their safety, placement, and support needs. Decisions were made for them rather than with them, often undermining their sense of agency and safety. Julie, for example, reflected on her experiences of seeking help:

> *The higher risk that you're classified, the less serious they take you … You get shut out of decisions about your own life.*
> *(Julie)*

Similarly, Caroline spoke about feeling sidelined when decisions were made by adults without her input, despite her lived experience:

> *I didn't really know where I could actually turn to … DHS would come in, take me out, then put me back without asking … I don't think I even spoke with a DHS worker.*
> *(Caroline)*

The systemic sidelining of young people's voices not only compromised the relevance and quality of the supports provided but often retraumatised young people already struggling to trust institutions and adults. As a result, young people often described a profound sense of invisibility and powerlessness within the systems meant to protect them.

Without being meaningfully included, young people interviewed found that critical aspects of their needs were missed or misunderstood. As Tom articulated, services often responded to the surface of the situation with a focus on adult behaviour, without genuinely seeking to listen to the child. He commented:

> *The parent is acting fine right now, so the workers just left. They believed what they saw in that moment and ignored what I was saying.*
> *(Tom)*

Previous findings similarly highlight that young people were frequently excluded from decisions about their safety and wellbeing, with one participant noting, 'Things were decided about me, not with me' (see further Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023). This exclusion reinforced feelings of invisibility and deepened distrust toward services. Indeed, a pattern of adult-centric, reactive responses left young people feeling excluded and, in some cases, judged or overlooked in the very circumstances of their victimisation. Young people reported that over time, such responses eroded their trust in the points of the system they had sought help from and reinforced a sense of systemic abandonment at a critical point in their lives.

Young people's experiences of distrust of the system are explored in more detail in the analysis section that follows.

A distrust of the system

When attempts to seek help were made, young people often reflected on the impacts of previous betrayals, such as being disbelieved, ignored, or further harmed after disclosure. Young people described that these betrayals, often from adults they assumed they could trust, left deep scars. They instilled a sense of mistrust in adults and often of those working within the broader ecosystem of responses to family violence (within and beyond the justice system).

Experiences of betrayal also taught young victim-survivors that disclosure could be problematic. Echoing previous research, many young people feared that disclosing violence would either have no effect or could actively worsen their situation, reinforcing the sense that silence was safer (Fitz-Gibbon, 2025; Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023). In this study, one young victim-survivor, Caroline, reflected on the impact of being removed from care settings multiple times, only to be returned without any real change:

> *It was more inconsistent being pulled in and out of care than being kept safe. I didn't really know where I could turn.*
> *(Caroline)*

These patterns of systemic failure to act led many young people to internalise a belief that help was either unavailable or unsafe. Another young victim-survivor commented:

> *After a while, you just stop expecting adults to do anything.*
> *(Amira)*

In addition to those who had negative past experiences with different points of the system, several young people reflected on being told growing up that those working within the justice system, police in particular, were not to be trusted. This is consistent with earlier findings, particularly regarding young people's views of the police (see, among others, Fitz-Gibbon, 2025; Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023), and how they shape long-term patterns of mistrust. As Caroline explained:

> *Mum had always said – don't trust the police, we were raised that the police were bad and were not to be trusted.*
> *(Caroline)*

As a result of these cumulative experiences and familial influences, many participants expressed a deep mistrust of multiple formal systems, including child protection, police, and support services. While some young people interviewed could articulate moments of individual worker support, overall, systems were experienced as unpredictable, bureaucratic, and often harmful. Tom explained:

> *Even the police didn't know what to do with me. Sometimes they didn't even know who to refer to. And when they did, it was too late.*
> *(Tom)*

Andi described needing external validation to begin trusting her own experience:

> *I'd been gaslit so much that I didn't trust myself. It wasn't until other people gave me the words that I started to believe it was real.*
> *(Andi)*

Together, these experiences illustrate the urgent need to rebuild trust by designing systems that are trauma-informed, youth-centred, and consistent in their care, communication, and follow-through. As emphasised by young people in previous research, rebuilding trust requires consistent, trauma-informed, and youth-centred engagement across the system - not just isolated acts of support.

3. Missed opportunities for intervention

The worst thing wasn't the violence. It was no one stepping in.
(Jayden)

Across the interviews, young people described numerous missed opportunities for intervention, where clear indicators of harm were either overlooked, minimised, or addressed only after reaching crisis point. These findings are consistent with previous research which has highlighted how the current service and statutory responses often rely on full disclosures from children and young people, rather than proactively identifying and responding to cumulative signs of risk (see also Fitz-Gibbon, 2025; Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023).

Unanswered reports

Throughout the interviews several young people recounted experiences where - despite feeling that they were exhibiting clear impacts of harm - there was no timely intervention to address their risk or safety needs. This includes a number of examples where young people described how repeated reports to child protection and other agencies did not result in any action. Amy powerfully captured this frustration:

> *DHS never really stepped up and did what they were supposed to do … They knew. There were 15 DHS reports. Nothing happened until my mum was incarcerated.*
> *(Amy)*

Amy further reflected on the emotional and practical barriers to disclosing abuse earlier, describing the complex fear dynamics that silenced her:

> *It was a really tricky situation, because Mum did the whole like – 'don't fucking tell them what's going on under our house. They'll take you away from me forever. You'll never see me again, like you won't have anything if I'm not here', those sorts of things. So we never really admitted anything to DHS when they were questioning us, until she went to prison, and then it all just came out … I wanted to get out of there. So, so, so badly … DHS did come to the school multiple times, but I was so terrified of what would happen. What if I told them and they didn't take me away? … I do think about it now and wish I just ran away …*
> *(Amy)*

Other young victim-survivors similarly commented:

> *They waited until it was really bad before they believed me. School just looked the other way. No one asked why I was covered in bruises.*
> *(Amira)*

Previous research has similarly found that despite repeated opportunities for intervention, systemic responses often placed the burden of disclosure onto the young victim-survivors themselves (see, among others, Fitz-Gibbon, 2025; Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023). Rather than recognising patterns of harm and acting protectively, systems frequently waited for children and young people to explicitly disclose their experiences - a process complicated by fear, loyalty, manipulation, and survival instincts within violent family environments. The experiences of young victim-survivors interviewed illustrate a dangerous gap: the system often relies on full disclosure from child victim-survivors who are living in unsafe environments rather than proactively identifying cumulative risks and responding appropriately.

Obtaining help at the point of a 'high risk' crisis

Across the interviews, young people highlighted that services were predominantly reactive - meaningful support was typically only offered once situations escalated to immediate crises, such as homelessness or physical danger. From their vantage, this meant that earlier opportunities to intervene, prevent harm, and provide safety were consistently missed. Specifically, several young people reported that meaningful help was only provided once their situations escalated to an immediate crisis - homelessness, visible injury, or criminal justice system involvement. As two young victim-survivors remarked:

> *You had to already be bleeding or on the streets before anyone did anything.*
> *(Jayden)*

> *The system says it cares about kids, but it really only steps in when it's too late.*
> *(Sophie)*

Prior to reaching crisis points, system responses were often procedural, dismissive, or based on brief surface assessments. One young victim-survivor succinctly described the situation:

> *[They said] the parent is acting fine right now, so they must be fine all the time.*
> *(Tom)*

This reactive model - waiting for clear and extreme risk before acting - left young people in prolonged periods of danger, isolation, and trauma, despite the existence of earlier opportunities for preventive intervention. Consistent with previous findings, young people described services responding reactively rather than proactively, often requiring visible crises - such as homelessness, serious injury, or criminal justice system involvement - before meaningful action was taken. Earlier signs of escalating harm were often missed or minimised, leaving young people exposed to prolonged danger.

Instability of out-of-home care arrangements

When young people were removed from unsafe environments, out-of-home care placements frequently introduced new layers of trauma. Instability, sibling separation, and unsafe residential care environments often deepened feelings of abandonment and distrust. Several young people interviewed had spent time in out-of-home care. When asking them about their experiences of seeking help at the point of crisis, these young people frequently referenced the instability and trauma of the out-of-home care system as compounding their experiences. For example, Caroline spoke of the profound distress caused by being separated from her siblings:

> *I was so worried about protecting my brother and sister. When we went into care we got split up. I refused to eat or sleep until they let me call my brother or sister.*
> *(Caroline)*

For Caroline, residential care environments were not places of healing, but further sites of harm. She described:

> *Residential care just made everything that I experienced even worse … Everything I endured – loud noise, glass breaking – it was all triggers for me … you'd think the staff members there would care.*
> *(Caroline)*

Similarly, another young victim-survivor commented:

> *Residential care was just a different kind of survival mode.*
> *(Dylan)*

As captured here, out-of-home care often exposed the young victim-survivors interviewed to additional trauma. These experiences are consistent with previous findings that highlight the significant trauma and negative outcomes associated with out-of-home care placements (see, among others, Fitz-Gibbon, 2025; Lima, Maclean & O'Donnell, 2019; Lund & Stokes, 2020; Mendes, 2022).

Young people often found that residential care environments reproduced the instability, lack of safety, and emotional neglect they had experienced in their abusive family homes. In particular, a number of young people reflected on the emotional exhaustion and instability experienced when forced to endure multiple placements. One young victim-survivor commented:

> *Every time I was moved, it felt like starting all over again. You don't heal when you're constantly packing your bags.*

Rather than offering pathways to safety, recovery and healing, care placements too often compounded their distrust of adults and systems, reinforcing feelings of abandonment and hopelessness. Furthermore, Victorian-based research has found that young people are at risk of experiencing homelessness when leaving the out-of-home care system. For example, in their report Keep Caring, the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People found nearly a third of young people leaving care in Victoria were identified as homeless between 2013 and 2015, with initial experience of homelessness being a risk factor for subsequent or repeat experiences of homelessness (CCYP, 2020, see also MacKenzie et al., 2020).

That initial experiences of homelessness beget future experiences is reflected in MCMs (2024) recent homelessness snapshot. It revealed that two-thirds of young people have experienced homelessness for two or more years, and one-third reported that they were 16 years old or younger when they first experienced homelessness. Alongside the experiences of the young people interviewed, these documented patterns underscore the need for service systems to be reimagined using child- and family violence-informed lenses; safety, stability, and healing need to be prioritised, with earlier interventions disrupting the cycle of trauma, disconnection and homelessness.

4. Seeking help at school

School was my safe place, but they didn't know what was happening at home.
(Dylan)

For many young people interviewed, schools represented both a missed opportunity for early intervention and, at times, a limited source of support. Despite the critical role schools could play, the majority of young people interviewed described their absence of education about family violence. In addition, and despite the potential for schools to act as safe points of disclosure, few young people reported receiving meaningful support. As Caroline starkly reflected:

> *No one ever talked about family violence at school. Not once.*
> *(Caroline)*

This section examines the role and impact of schools, specifically concerning young victim-survivors' experiences of education discontinuity, and identifies gaps in school-based interventions.

Education discontinuity

Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that disrupted school participation was a common experience among young victim-survivors of family violence. Many young people interviewed described frequent school changes, long periods of absence, or complete disconnection from education. These experiences align with national research highlighting the educational consequences of domestic and family violence during childhood. A recent Australian study involving more than 5,000 young people found that exposure to violence can profoundly affect school engagement, leading to disrupted attendance, reduced academic achievement, and reluctance to seek support within educational settings (Stewart, Roberts & Fitz-Gibbon, 2025). Among those aged 16 to 18 who had lived through domestic and family violence, over half reported difficulties concentrating at school, and one in five indicated they had left school entirely. Recognising and responding to these effects is essential to ensure that schools can provide safe and supportive spaces for young victim-survivors (Stewart, Roberts & Fitz-Gibbon, 2025).

The instability of school engagement recounted by numerous young people interviewed was not merely incidental. Indeed, in some cases, young people believed it was a deliberate tactic of control used by abusive family members to isolate them from external support networks. As Andi explained:

> *I went to four different schools, so I imagine ... and I was also taken out a lot during school because of family violence, just part of, like, the isolation tactics.*
> *(Andi)*

Similarly, Caroline spoke of long periods of isolation:

> *I was meant to be getting homeschooled, but I was simply living in the caravan ... I had no phone, I had no friends. It was a very isolating time in my life.*
> *(Caroline)*

Given the instability in their attendance at school, friendships - particularly those maintained online when the young victim-survivor was either not attending school at all or was attending infrequently - became vital. Tom, for example, spoke about the importance of maintaining relationships through online spaces:

> *Those friendships can be maintained through change ... If I didn't have that space I wouldn't have had any long-term friendships, I would have even less experience socialising.*
> *(Tom)*

In addition to the loss of friendships, without consistent engagement in school, young people lost educational opportunities. They also lost critical chances for earlier intervention and identification of risk.

Throughout the interviews, numerous young people recounted circumstances where they had tried to seek help from a trusted adult at school, or where they knew that the school was aware of the abuse, but support and safety did not follow. Dylan, for example, described:

> *So, I never really spoke about it, but I do know – I know for sure that the school that I was attending was aware because I live on the back of my school … And there were a few times that I was kind of pulled aside by the school chaplains and the counsellors and things to ask me about my home situation things, but I never really saw or heard from them after they would do that. And then I do know at one point that – it was more when I started high school that the school had on record to call the police straight away if my mum's ex-partner showed up. And he did once and they didn't not only not do that, but they let him enter the school.*
> *(Dylan)*

This aligns with other recent Australian-based research which has documented inadequacies in school-based responses to young people's disclosures of family violence victimisation (see, most recently, Fitz-Gibbon, 2025).

However, and despite the many identified barriers to help-seeking and maintaining connection, a small number of young victim-survivors interviewed identified individual teachers, counsellors or other school staff as important sources of support, even if only fleetingly. Hunter shared that when he disclosed violence at school, it triggered critical support pathways:

> *I basically just told my school … they reported it, and then people from support services actually got involved.*
> *(Hunter)*

Similarly, two other victim-survivors reflected:

> *For me, personally, my school has a really good support system. And I truly feel respected by all of my teachers. I have such a close bond with them that if they see me looking upset just after class, they'll be like, hey … do you want to just hang back for a second? You looked a bit down. Are you okay? And because that is – they have fostered that kind of environment, I'm more than happy to say what's going on. So, I think more than the way you've been asked, it's how your relationship is with that person. And whether you've set yourself up to be someone that's going to respect you and be open to whatever you have to say.*
> *(Amira)*

> *I feel like when I was in school because my sister experienced it when she was in school, we had the same wellbeing coordinator and when it was happening to us, she was switched on and knew, 'Okay, something's up at home,' and if she wasn't there, we probably wouldn't have been able to get the support that we needed, especially school uniforms and stuff like that and books and the things that we needed to actually have for education, so she just knew what we needed and how to support us because our sister experienced it before. She had more of an understanding and context of what was going on.*
> *(Alba)*

Interestingly, among the young victim-survivors who had had a positive experience of seeking help at school, there was often a perception that these trusted adults had worked outside of the usual systems to advocate above and beyond for the young person's needs, even when broader structures failed to act. So, while individual staff sometimes made a difference, it was the exception rather than the norm. Young people were reliant on the goodwill and persistence of individual teachers; rather than consistent responses being embedded into school systems.

Critical gaps in school-based interventions

A clear and consistent gap raised by participants was the lack of education around family violence, respectful relationships, and help-seeking. Most participants did not recall receiving any meaningful education on identifying different forms of violence, understanding risk, or knowing where to seek help. As two young victim-survivors remarked:

> *I don't remember receiving any of that [education about domestic violence].*
> *(Andi)*

> *Teachers taught us about stranger danger, but no one talked about violence at home.*
> *(Sophie)*

Hunter also noted that any discussions about violence provided during school were extremely limited:

> *We had like a brief, sort of, like ... telling us that's not right and stuff like that. But there wasn't, like, a whole lesson or anything.*
> *(Hunter)*

For those experiencing violence, the absence of targeted education compounded feelings of isolation and normalised their experiences of harm. The consequence was that many young people, already coping with trauma and instability at home, missed critical opportunities to recognise their experiences as abuse - and to know that support options existed.

Beyond the provision of education on respectful relationships, 'red flags', and how to identify and disclose specific forms of violence, a number of young people interviewed reflected on the missed opportunities for intervention within the school setting. As has been covered in earlier sections of this report, young people recounted experiences where they had hoped their teacher might identify the harm they were experiencing and provide support. As one young victim-survivor described:

> *If someone had just asked the right question at school, everything could have been different.*
> *(Jayden)*

These insights from across the interviews highlight the dual role schools must play - not only as sites for proactive, age-appropriate education on family violence and respectful relationships but also as critical spaces for early identification and intervention. Embedding trauma-informed and family violence-informed approaches across school communities is essential to ensuring that signs of harm, and young people's experiences of violence, are recognised and acted upon at the earliest opportunity.

5. Looking forward

Despite the profound harm and disruption many young people experienced, the interviews also revealed extraordinary resilience and even hope. Across the conversations, young victim-survivors expressed a powerful commitment to creating safer futures for themselves and others. As Caroline reflected:

> *Obviously, it does hurt … but I can't change it but I can use it to give me strength to make a difference and also to create a life for myself that would be the life that my younger self would want.*
> *(Caroline)*

Their insights provide a clear and compelling roadmap for system reform, one that places children and young people who have experienced family violence at the centre of design, decision-making, and effective intervention.

What young people say is needed to support help-seeking

Many participants shared specific reflections on what could have made a difference during their own experiences of family violence. As Julie simply stated:

> *I think there is a lot that I wish was available to me.*
> *(Julie)*

One of the strongest themes across the interviews was the urgent need for frontline workers - across schools, child protection, housing, police, mental health and family violence services - to receive specialised training in engaging with young people who have experienced trauma. Young victim-survivors stressed that early interactions with services were often alienating, transactional, or misinformed, and that they missed critical opportunities to build trust and offer safety. Julie described the importance of that initial point of engagement:

> *Frontline workers to really understand how to engage with these children and young people … the initial engagement isn't strong enough … a little more time and effort needs to go into how you are engaging with these young people.*
> *(Julie)*

She also warned of the lasting consequences when that early engagement fails:

> *If that engagement isn't good, you lose that child or young person. They won't come back.*
> *(Julie)*

Amy similarly highlighted the need for trauma-informed practice in the education sector, reflecting on the lack of trained professionals available when early interventions could have been most impactful:

> *In primary school there was no mental health [worker], or no one trained in any sort of thing like that. I know that there were other kids too in the school that were going through crisis … and there was nothing available back in the early stages where that early intervention was actually needed.*
> *(Amy)*

Current system map: the system's perspective

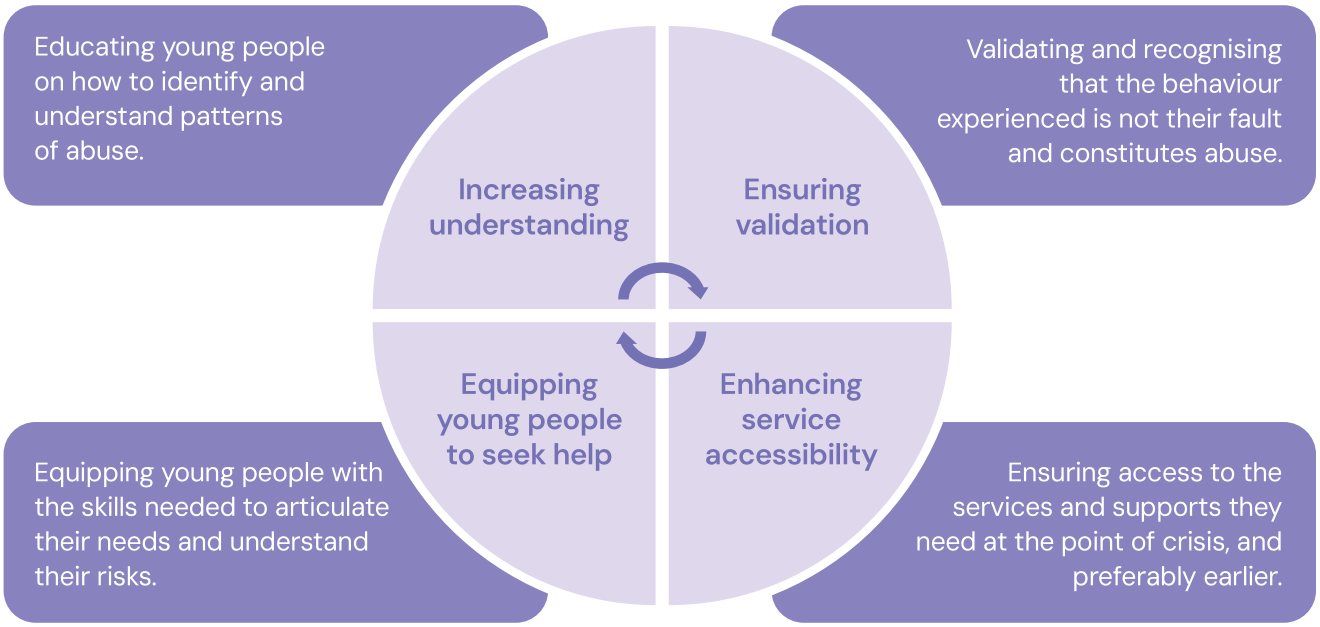
Based on the current mapping of systems, service reviews and providers, there are a number of disparate services technically available to young people.

Seeking help: a young person's perspective

In reality there are limited services available to young people. Many are inaccessible as entry points or are seen as irrelevant by the young people who need them.

Young people emphasised that building a system capable of responding effectively to children and young people in crisis requires not only service availability, but also fundamentally different ways of communicating, engaging, and validating young people's experiences. Four key themes relating to what is needed to support help-seeking emerged from the interviews with young victim-survivors; they are summarised in the figure below. Critically, the young people interviewed emphasised that for any services to be truly accessible young people like themselves needed to have a clear understanding of what services exist and how they can be accessed. An emphasis on service system navigation was viewed as essential to success in designing and delivering a system that can meet the specific needs of young victim-survivors.

Figure: What young victim-survivors say is needed to support help-seeking



As shown in this figure, validation emerged among young victim-survivors as a core principle for improving crisis responses. Several participants spoke about the transformative impact of simply being believed and supported. When asked about the most important message a young person should receive when reaching out for help, Julie said:

> *Let the young person know – I believe them, I am in their corner, and I support them.*
> *(Julie)*

For young people who have been systematically silenced or disbelieved, this foundation of trust and affirmation was viewed as critical to recovery and continued help-seeking.

Opportunities to utilise technology to better reach young victim-survivors

Another consistent theme which emerged across the interviews was young victim-survivors' views on the potential to harness technology to better reach and support young people experiencing family violence. This has been referred to in recent advocacy as akin to the creation of a 'digital front door' for young people seeks to accessing crisis services. Young people interviewed in this study described existing service websites as often overwhelming, inaccessible, and geared towards adult audiences. As Tom explained:

> *Service websites are just pages and pages. When you're in trauma, it's overwhelming.*
> *(Tom)*

Young victim-survivors identified a clear need for more youth-friendly digital platforms, incorporating simple visual communication, accessible language, and easy navigation. A number of young victim-survivors suggested that help-seeking resources need to be designed with a trauma-informed understanding of cognitive overload, particularly as experienced by young people in crisis.

Visual communication – through infographics, animations, short videos, or story-based content – was identified by young people as particularly valuable. Simple, affirming pathways (rather than dense blocks of policy text) were seen as important to empowering young people to understand their experiences and to have the confidence to take steps towards safety.

In addition to online channels, young people also highlighted the need for help-seeking information to be integrated into mainstream media. One young victim-survivor proposed:

> *Maybe we should have ads about, 'are you being abused? Do you know who to talk to? Do you have support?' … Because even for a lot of people in these situations, they might not even particularly recognise that they are exactly being abused … So how do we get these resources to people so that they can actually utilise them?*
> *(Tom)*

Mainstream visibility – through public campaigns, social media, and accessible advertising – was identified by several interview participants as essential to reaching isolated young people who may not know they are experiencing abuse or who fear seeking help.

The need for an accessible self-assessment tool for young people to understand risk

As already captured in this analysis, throughout the interviews a number of young victim-survivors described the challenges of recognising abuse, especially when coercive control, emotional manipulation, and gaslighting have been normalised within family or young intimate relationships. Many participants spoke about doubting their perceptions or internalising blame for their experiences. To address this, a small number of young people spoke – in varying levels of detail – about the value of an accessible, trauma-informed and age-appropriate self-assessment tool. Such a tool could provide early validation to support young people to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy behaviours, which may encourage earlier help-seeking before harm escalates.

Young victim-survivors emphasised that any self-assessment tool must be accessible, non-threatening, and framed around concepts of safety, respect, and wellbeing, rather than legalistic or adult-centric definitions of abuse. Visual elements, simple language, and culturally inclusive examples would be critical to ensuring accessibility across diverse groups of young people.

Young people suggested that a self-assessment tool could be integrated across multiple entry points – including school wellbeing programs, health services, youth-focused online platforms, and confidential crisis support websites – to ensure accessibility for young people regardless of where or how they seek help. Previous research has highlighted the value of early self-recognition of abuse in improving help-seeking outcomes among young people (Campo, 2015; Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2020). Developing an accessible, youth-specific self-assessment tool may provide a useful early intervention opportunity for children and young people impacted by family violence.

Conclusion

> 'We all have a spark in our eyes when we are younger ... I am so much more than what I have been through ... I was walking on eggshells for most of my life. I have sworn to myself that I won't walk on eggshells because that's a disservice to my younger self. '
>
> Caroline

This study presents new knowledge on the need for systemic reform in how Victoria responds to children and young people experiencing and escaping family violence. A range of significant reforms have been undertaken following the Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016), and there is a growing national recognition that children are victim-survivors in their own right. Yet this research documents that Victoria's crisis response system remains fragmented, adult-centric, and largely inaccessible for young victim-survivors, particularly those who seek help without a protective parent.

Young people interviewed for this study described experiences of isolation, missed opportunities for intervention, and a lack of visibility and recognition within the very systems that should be accessible and designed to protect them. They navigated a landscape that was not only confusing and overwhelming but often dismissive of their needs. Many of the young people interviewed described their disclosures and help-seeking as being met with responses that felt disempowering. Others described feeling forced to prove their trauma before they were believed - if they were believed at all.

Throughout the interviews, young people shared that violence was often not recognised by the adults around them, and services only became visible once their situation had reached crisis point, which often involved experiences of homelessness, serious injury, or severe distress. Several young people described giving repeated, unanswered reports to child protection and other services; they experienced a crisis response system that placed the burden of disclosure and persistence to seek help on them. Their experiences echo findings from previous research: that the crisis response system too often waits for acute harm before meaningful support is offered.

One of the most persistent themes was the sense of invisibility experienced by young victim-survivors. Young people did not see themselves in the service system - this is perhaps unsurprising, given that the system has been designed largely with adults in focus. Young people interviewed described information that was not age-appropriate, service entry points that assumed an adult was present, and intake processes that treated unaccompanied minors as ineligible or untrustworthy. Services were rarely tailored to the complexity of young people's lives, and they were frequently designed around adult definitions of harm, disclosure, and safety.

And yet, despite this, young people offered a powerful and generous vision for change.

Throughout the interviews young victim-survivors identified what is needed to improve crisis responses to family violence in Victoria. This included clear and visible information about services; access to trauma-informed, youth-centred workers; and safe, stable housing options tailored to the range of circumstances in which young people seek help to escape family violence. Young victim-survivors emphasised the importance of earlier intervention - not just at the point of acute risk. Beyond improvements specific to crisis system responses, young people interviewed identified opportunities to harness technology and media to better reach young people in the spaces where they live and learn. Importantly, they reiterated the power of being believed - of being heard, validated, and supported - by a system that responds to them as a victim in their own right and not only as an extension of a parent or carer.

This report highlights the need for a dedicated, youth-specific crisis response to family violence in Victoria, one that understands and reflects the diverse and complex realities of the lives of young people experiencing and escaping family violence.

In addition, the findings highlight the need for:

Earlier intervention

Young people need access to support before reaching the point of crisis. Schools must be better resourced and trained to provide family violence-informed responses and connected with the broader service system to act as trusted, trauma-informed entry points for disclosure and early intervention.

Improved workforce capacity

Youth-specialist workers should be embedded within education systems. Beyond schools specifically, frontline workers engaging frequently with young people across social service systems should be trained in domestic violence-informed, youth-centred, and culturally safe practices.

Coordinated care pathways

Stronger partnerships between youth services, family violence services, and other sectors are needed to ensure continuity of care and effective support as young people navigate systems.

Independent access to supports

There is a need to ensure young people can access financial, housing, and other supports without requiring parental consent in circumstances where it is unsafe or inappropriate to do so.

Technology-enabled information

Family violence and youth services should leverage the social media platforms and online spaces young people trust and frequent to deliver accessible and engaging help-seeking information.

Self-assessment tools

Young people see value in developing tools and resources to support them to better recognise unsafe situations, to name their experiences, and to identify safe pathways to support.

Youth-centred system design

Systems must embed the voices and lived experiences of young people in the design of service responses, eligibility criteria, and crisis pathways to ensure the needs of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right are reflected in practice.

The experiences of the young people who contributed to this research show remarkable clarity in identifying what failed them but also what could have made a difference. Meaningfully recognising young people as victim-survivors in their own right requires more than an acknowledgement in policy. It demands tangible change in how services are designed, funded and delivered. We must ensure that young people experiencing and escaping family violence do not continue to be unseen, unsupported, and at risk.

References

Alves, T., & Roggenbuck, C. (2021). *Final report: Towards a youth homelessness strategy for Victoria*. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI). Available via: https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/professional-services/Towards-a-Youth-Homelessness-Strategy-for-Victoria

Allnock, D., & Miller, P. (2013). No one noticed, no one heard: A study of disclosures of childhood abuse. NSPCC.

Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI). (2017). *What is the link between domestic violence and homelessness?* Available via: https://www.ahuri.edu.au/analysis/brief/what-link-between-domestic-violence-and-homelessness

Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). (2020). *Children and young people participating in research*. Available via: https://aifs.gov.au/resources/short-articles/children-and-young-people-participating-research

Bastian, C., Wendt, S., Rowley, G., & Elder, A. (2023). Improving service responses for children and young people who experience domestic and family violence: *A way forward, Australian Social Work*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2023.2267046

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners. London: Sage.

Broady, T.R., & Gray, R.M. (2018). The intersection of domestic violence and child protection in Australia: Program participant accounts. *Australian Social Work,* 71(2), 189–201. https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2017.1422774

Campo, M. (2015). Children's exposure to domestic and family violence: Key issues and responses, CFCA Paper No. 36. Australian Institute of Family Studies. Available via: https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/cfca-36-children-exposure-fdv_0.pdf

Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016). *Children's exposure to domestic and family violence: Key issues and responses*. Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Commission for Children and Young People. (2020). *Keep Caring: Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care*. Available via: https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/inquiries/systemic-inquiries/keep-caring/

Connolly, H. (2024) Unseen and unheard: Listening to the voices of young people with lived experiences of violence. October, Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia.

Cooper, T. (2018). *Policy and support needs of independent homeless young people 12–15 years: Young people's voices*. Commissioner for Children and Young People and Edith Cowan University. Available via: https://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/our-work/resources/homelessness/

Corrie, T., & Moore, S. (2021). *Amplify: Turning up the volume on young people and family violence (Research Report)*. Melbourne City Mission. Available via: https://apo.org.au/node/315414

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2024). *Unlocking the prevention potential: Accelerating action to end domestic, family and sexual violence*. Commonwealth of Australia.

Department of Social Services (DSS). (2022). National plan to end violence against women and children 2022-2032. Australian Government. Available via: https://www.dss.gov.au/national-plan-end-gender-based-violence/resource/national-plan-end-violence-against-women-and-children-2022-2032

Fitz-Gibbon, K. (2025). *Silence and inaction: Children and young people's experiences of violence and systemic failure in South Australia*. Report prepared for the South Australian Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence. Sequre Consulting, Victoria, Australia. DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.29067608

Fitz-Gibbon, K., McGowan, J. and Stewart, R. (2023) I believe you: Children and young people's experiences of seeking help, securing help and navigating the family violence system. Monash University. DOI: 10.26180/21709562.

Fitz-Gibbon, K. & Meyer, S. (2023) Listen to her. Act now: The experiences and impact of child abuse on Australian girls. Monash University and Griffith University. DOI: 10.26180/24282775

Fitz-Gibbon, K., Meyer, S., Boxall, H., Maher, J., & Roberts, S. (2022). Adolescent family violence in Australia: A national study of service and support needs for young people who use family violence (Research report, 18/2022). ANROWS.

Higgins, D.J., Mathews, B., Pacella, R., Scott, J.G., Finkelhor, D., Meinck, F., Erskine, H.E., Thomas, H.J., Lawrence, D.M., Haslam, D.M., Malacova, E., & Dunne, M.P. (2023). The prevalence and nature of multi-type child maltreatment in Australia. *The Medical Journal of Australia, 218*(S6), S19-S25. https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.51868

Kalemba, J., Kos, A., Greenland, N., Plummer, J., Brennan, N., Freeburn, T., Nguyen, T. and Christie, R. (2022). *Without a home: First-time youth homelessness in the COVID-19 period*. Mission Australia. Available via: https://apo.org.au/node/318788

Lima, F., Maclean, M., & O'Donnell, M. (2019). Exploring outcomes for young people who have experienced out-of-home care. Telethon Kids Institute.

Lund, S., & Stokes, C. (2020). The educational outcomes of children in care – A scoping review. *Children Australia, 45*(4), 249–257.

MacKenzie, D., Hand, T., Zufferey, C., McNelis, S., Spinney, A., & Tedmanson, D. (2020). *Redesign of a homelessness service system for young people* (Final Report 327). Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), Available via: http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/327

Mathews, B., Pacella, R., Dunne, M. P., Quirk, F., Lawrence, D., Scott, J., ... & Haslam, D. (2023). *Australian child maltreatment study (ACMS) – Final report*. Department of Social Services, Australian Government.

Mathews, B., Pacella, R., Scott, J., Finkelhor, D., Meinck, F., Higgins, D.J., Erskine, H.E., Thomas, H.J., Lawrence, D.M., Haslam, D.M., Malacova, E., & Dunne, M. P. (2023). The prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from a national survey. *Medical Journal of Australia, 218*, S13–S18.

Mendes, P. (2012). Examining the experiences of young people transitioning from out-of-home care in rural Victoria. *Rural Society, 21*(3), 198-209. https://doi.org/10.5172/rsj.2012.21.3.198

Mendes, P. (2022). Ending Australia's status as a leaving care laggard: The case for a national extended care framework to lift the outcomes for young people transitioning from out-of-home care. *Australian Social Work, 75*(1), 122–132.

Melbourne City Mission (MCM). (2024). *Victorian youth homelessness snapshot 2024*. Available via: https://www.mcm.org.au/news/victorian-youth-homelessness-snapshot

Melbourne City Mission (MCM), Berry Street Y-Change, Centre for Innovative Justice, & Youth Affairs Council Victoria. (2024). *Pave the way: Investing in the safety and futures of the next generation – Strong foundations submission 2024*. Available via: https://mcm.org.au/advocacy/research-and-policy-submissions?publicationtype=Policy+Submission&topic=Family+violence&year=2024#content-filters

Munro, E. (2001). Empowering looked after children. *Child and Family Social Work, 6*(2), 129–137.

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13.

Royal Commission into Family Violence. (2016). *Report and recommendations*. State of Victoria, Victoria. Available via: https://www.rcfv.com.au/

Stark, E. (2024). *Coercive control: How men entrap women in personal life* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Stewart, R., Roberts, S., & Fitz-Gibbon, K. (2025) Examining the impact of domestic and family violence on young Australians' school-level education. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*. DOI: 10.1002/ajs4.70028.

The Foyer Foundation, & Accenture. (2022). *Under one roof: The social and economic impact of youth foyers*. Available via: https://foyer.org.au/under-one-roof/

Wendt, S., & Zannettino, L. (2015). *Domestic violence in diverse contexts: A re-examination of gender*. Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre Inc.
GPO Box 4396, Melbourne VIC 3001
admin@safesteps.org.au
www.safesteps.org.au
ABN 86 138 521 643

24/7 domestic and family violence crisis support

1800 015 188

Live Chat: safesteps.org.au
Email: safesteps@safesteps.org.au

Safe Steps