

## Early intervention in family and gender- based violence: Scoping paper

2025

## **Acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples**

Safe and Equal is based on Wurundjeri Country. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional and ongoing custodians of the lands on which we live and work, and we pay respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded and recognise First Nations peoples' rights to self-determination and continuing connections to land, waters and community.

## **Honouring Victim Survivors**

Safe and Equal acknowledges the strength and resilience of adults, children and young people who have experienced family violence and recognises that it is essential that responses to family violence are informed by their expert knowledge and advocacy. We pay respects to those who have not survived and acknowledge the lasting impacts of this preventable violence on families and communities.

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## **About Safe and Equal**

At Safe and Equal, we work towards a world where everyone is safe, respected and thriving, living free from family and gender-based violence.

We are the peak body for Victorian organisations that specialise in family and gender-based violence across the continuum, including primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery. We are an independent, non-government organisation.

Our work prioritises the safety of all people experiencing, recovering from or at risk of family and gender-based violence. While we know that most family violence is perpetrated by men against women and children, we recognise that family violence impacts people across a diversity of gender identities, social and cultural contexts, and within various intimate, family and other relationships.

We apply an intersectional feminist lens in our work to address the gendered drivers of violence, and how these overlap and intersect with additional forms of violence, oppression and inequality. As a peak, we work with and for our members to prevent and respond to violence, building a better future for adults, children and young people experiencing, at risk of, or recovering from family and gender-based violence.

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## Introduction

Addressing the needs of victim-survivors and ultimately ending family and gender-based violence will require specialised and complementary activities undertaken by a range of practitioners, programs and organisations.

Ending family violence is long-term work that must occur at all levels and all sites across the community. The 'continuum' of work in preventing family and gender-based violence involves interconnected and concurrent activities across three broad categories:

- primary prevention (preventing violence before it starts)
- early intervention – or secondary prevention (preventing violence before it escalates)
- response and recovery– or tertiary prevention (preventing violence from happening again and supporting victim-survivor's healing journeys).

Initiatives focused on each of these areas have a different focus, and require different specialist skills and different resourcing, but they also overlap and should all reinforce and complement each other to create a holistic and integrated overall approach.

Historically, at Commonwealth and state levels, there is a focus on responding to family violence by supporting victim survivors during and after their experiences of family violence, intervening to stop violence from reoccurring, and holding persons who use violence accountable. Timely access to legal advice and improving justice responses to stop harm from compounding are also important for prevention. Meanwhile, primary prevention describes work done across communities, organisations and society in settings where people live, learn, work, socialise and play to address the underlying drivers of violence and stop it from happening in the first place.

Early intervention is receiving growing attention in an effort to reduce the multitude of harms that result from family violence and offer safer pathways out of the escalation of violence. While some elements of early intervention have been resourced, often the focus of funding shifts over time to a crisis response due to increasing demand. Although it is a key part of the continuum, early intervention has received less specific focus in terms of building an evidence base for what works across systems, and developing considerations for policy and practice and coordination by key stakeholders. Scoping some of the gaps and opportunities in early intervention is the focus of this paper.

Early intervention is both simple and complex:

- It is simple in its aims to work with and target individuals and groups that are at higher risk of perpetrating or experiencing family and gender-based violence, to change this trajectory of violence.

- It is complex because its techniques and approaches are varied and can involve many sectors and systems that are connected to family violence specialist services. It can bridge both response to, and the primary prevention of, family and gender-based violence as well as long-term healing and recovery from family and gender-based violence.

The complexity of early intervention is also due to its relationship with broader concepts of individual and community wellbeing and the social context in which family and gender-based violence occurs. The success of early intervention efforts is, in part, reliant on the political, economic and social structures of inequality and marginalisation that shape individual and communities' access to protective factors. This includes, for example, access to resources, safe and secure housing, financial independence and security, education, employment, accessible and inclusive physical and mental health supports, and broader community connections and healthy relationships.

## **Overview and scope**

This paper seeks to identify opportunities to build a more consistent and coordinated approach to early intervention in the family and gender-based violence sectors in Victoria. This has been identified by Safe and Equal and its members as a continuing key gap in the family and gender-based violence system and approach in Victoria. This paper draws on existing work that aimed to understand early intervention and its approaches, including *Expanding early interventions in family violence in Victoria* released by DV Vic in 2016.

The aims of this paper are:

- 1) To synthesise the current early intervention landscape for family and gender-based violence in Victoria.
- 2) To identify opportunities for early intervention activities in the specialist family violence services, primary prevention and other relevant sectors where feasible.
- 3) To support and inform advocacy around early intervention.

It is outside of the scope of this paper to conduct a review of Australian and international literature. Rather, this paper looks towards the current landscape in Victoria to understand what existing approaches can be built on and strategically strengthened.

First, in this paper, we focus on key policy frameworks that guide early intervention efforts nationally and in Victoria. Next, we examine early intervention in the context of primary prevention approaches and response and recovery, seeking to identify opportunities to leverage and expand on existing approaches and activities across the continuum. Then, we highlight Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches to early intervention as one of many communities that experience intersectional discrimination and oppression. Next the paper concentrates on people using violence and children and young people as critical focus areas for early intervention efforts. Lastly, we outline

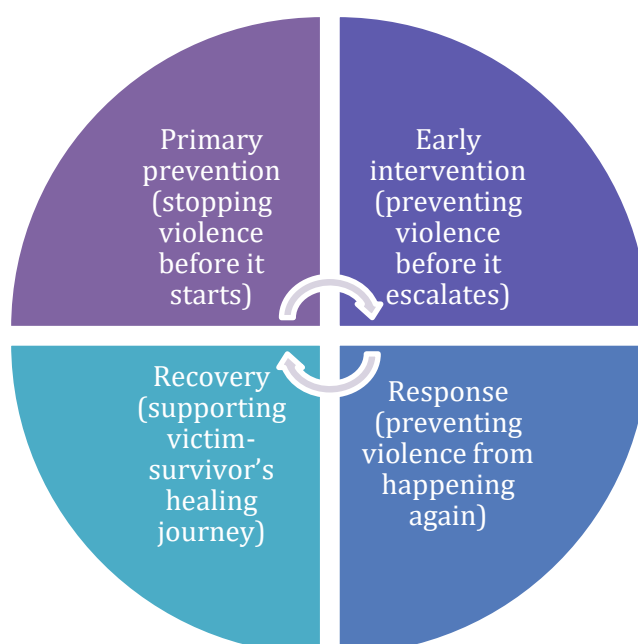
some opportunities and implications for further conceptualisation and advocacy on early intervention.

While this paper is limited in its scope, the intention is to start a conversation among Safe and Equal members and stakeholders and particularly, to identify opportunities to scale up and build on promising practice.

## **Early intervention in the context of family and gender-based violence**

Early intervention describes initiatives designed to stop early signs of abuse from escalating, and targeted interventions to shift attitudes and behaviours in ways that minimise immediate and long-term risk. This can involve working with groups or individuals who may be at higher risk of perpetrating or experiencing violence, focusing efforts where there are signs that violence is more likely to occur, and working more broadly across communities and society to improve approaches to recognising and responding to signs of violence.

The continuum of primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery and healing is dynamic; these approaches are non-linear and connect and complement each other (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. The continuum of work in family and gender-based violence**

For example, primary prevention efforts often lead to increased understanding of gender-based violence, which in turn can lead to an increase in disclosures of violence and use of response services. Individuals who experience or perpetrate family and

gender-based violence can benefit from primary prevention efforts (e.g. campaigns and awareness raising around what drives family and gender-based violence). Early intervention overlaps with response, healing and recovery, by preventing the recurrence of violence during crisis and long-term recovery for victim survivors. While each part of the continuum may have different target populations, aims and techniques, all activities can reinforce and complement one another simultaneously to achieve the goals of ending family and gender-based violence and supporting individuals and communities to thrive.

Early intervention has received less dedicated attention in policy and investment and is sometimes treated as an 'add on' to prevention or response. Yet, it is a critical component of a holistic approach and requires explicit policy, resourcing and specialist skills and practice, whether it is carried out in distinct programs or embedded across response, prevention and mainstream sectors and systems. Early intervention can include a diversity of cohorts, techniques and approaches. It includes both efforts to intervene to address the 'warning signs' or risk factor before an individual experiences or perpetrates family violence, as well as efforts to halt the recurrence of violence and prevent escalation during recovery and/or perpetration intervention.

There are opportunities for a greater focus on early intervention to bridge gaps in Victoria's ongoing efforts in family and gender-based violence and to enhance and coordinate efforts across the entire continuum.

### **The current early intervention policy landscape**

A comprehensive Commonwealth and Victorian policy mapping across family violence and intersecting social policy is outside of the scope of this paper. However, an analysis of key policies and frameworks around family and gender-based violence at both state and national level shows a consistent understanding of the continuum of work required across primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery. This approach guides work across sectors and systems and is also a feature of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children (2022–2032) (the National Plan).<sup>1</sup>

Early intervention comprises one of four domains of the National Plan, with the domain's objectives including:

1. Reduce the long-term impacts of exposure to violence and prevent further exposure.
2. Address adolescent violence in family settings.
3. Improve timely responses to newly identified cases of violence, attitudes and behaviours that may lead to violence perpetration.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Social Services (DSS) (2022) *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*, Commonwealth of Australia, Australia.



4. Enhance accountability of people who choose to use violence and address misidentification of perpetrators.
5. Build sector and community capacity to identify and support women and children at increased risk of experiencing gender-based violence and to intervene early to stop violence from escalating.

Early and more effective responses to family violence are emphasised in *Ending Family Violence: Victoria's Plan for Change (10 Year Plan)*, the overarching policy framework to guide the Victorian Government's responses to the 2016 Royal Commission into Family Violence. It recognises that early intervention needs to be embedded in all aspects of Victoria's family violence, social services and justice systems. The plan states:

*Getting the right support early—before a situation reaches crisis—can minimise disruption, trauma, physical and psychological injury and break intergenerational cycles of family violence. It also reduces the financial costs of family violence for individuals, government and the community.<sup>2</sup>*

Early intervention is embedded across a number of domains under the plan's Family Violence Outcomes Framework (FVOF) that measures outcomes and progress towards the aims of the plan. The FVOF Domains 2 and 4 focuses on preventing escalation and minimising harm including early identification of family violence, the provision of effective early interventions, a system that enables intervening early and access to support services.<sup>3</sup>

While there is an articulated need for early intervention across family violence-related policy, early intervention is often categorised with interventions to address perpetration or has a focus on children and young people only.

The Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM) is a critical system enabler of consistent family violence risk assessment and responses. This is a crucial pillar of Victoria's family violence system, supporting specialist family violence services and a range of other intersecting workforces to work together when addressing family violence. The scope of family violence practice under MARAM works across a victim-survivor's and perpetrator's interaction with the family violence system, "including risk identification for early intervention."<sup>4</sup>

The Victorian Government's Early Intervention Investment Framework (EIIF) is another key relevant government initiative. It is designed to incentivise evidence-based

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Premier and Cabinet (2016) *Ending Family Violence: Victoria's Plan for Change*, State of Victoria, Melbourne, Victoria, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Premier and Cabinet (2016) *Family Violence Outcomes Framework Measurement and Monitoring Implementation Strategy*, State of Victoria, Melbourne.

<sup>4</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2018) *Family violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework: A shared responsibility for assessing and managing family violence risk*, State of Victoria, Melbourne, p. 17.

resourcing to achieve broad outcomes across multiple portfolios. As the EIIF paper outlining the Victorian Government's approach states:

*Early intervention has both temporal and cross-portfolio dimensions – benefits may not be realised for some time, and they may not accrue to the portfolio where the investment was originally made. This combination creates a difficult environment for departments to coordinate responses to complex problems that affect multiple services and to evaluate their success.<sup>5</sup>*

The EIIF aims to address these challenges by enabling proactive collaboration across government departments in evidence-based ways and promoting a whole-of-government approach to early intervention. The EIIF prioritises outcome measures to understand how early intervention investment contributes to individual as well as broader community wellbeing and reducing usage of acute services including family violence services. It is worth noting that the EIIF is not a discrete funding source, but an overall framework that applies an 'avoided costs' methodology to regular state budget appropriation.

Nevertheless, a growing proportion of family and gender-based violence initiatives are funded under the EIIF. For instance, the 2024/2025 budget listed a number of initiatives in the EIIF that seek to mitigate and respond to family violence.<sup>6</sup> This includes funding of \$167.5 million over five years for programs that support victim survivors, provide perpetrator case management, and support schools to implement respectful relationships education. In this budget, community legal centres also received \$28.8 million over four years to undertake early intervention that includes connecting people experiencing family violence with timely legal advice and support.

Over time, there may be opportunities to consider how these initiatives fit within a comprehensive approach to family violence across the continuum, as well as how they fit with other initiatives funded under the EIIF that target children and young people's mental health, the education system, youth crime and youth justice, corrections and homelessness. As a significant government initiative, it would be useful to have further detail about these programs and investigate ways to support collaboration across services to better meet individual and community needs.

There are opportunities for greater clarity within Commonwealth and state policy on how governments are taking action and showing leadership on early intervention as a key domain in family and gender-based violence responses.

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Treasury and Finance (2020) *Early Intervention Investment Framework: A considered and collaborative approach*, State of Victoria, Melbourne, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Victoria Government (2024) Budget paper No 3, 2024–2025 Service Delivery Appendix B.

## Early intervention in the context of primary prevention

Primary prevention seeks to stop violence before it starts and shift the structures and social context that gives rise to family and gender-based violence occurs. It aims to reach the whole population, including individuals and groups that have a higher risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence. While primary prevention's target is further 'upstream' than early intervention, preventing violence in the long-term will inadvertently mean less individuals and groups require early intervention due to the overall reduction in prevalence rates (see Figure 2).<sup>7</sup>

Australia's shared framework for the prevention of violence against women, *Change the Story* has established that men's violence against women is driven by four main factors:

1. Condoning of violence against women
2. Men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life
3. Rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity
4. Male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control<sup>8</sup>

Primary prevention activities focus primarily on changing these gendered drivers across all levels of society where people live, learn, work, play and socialise. It involves a range of approaches, techniques and audiences depending on what the initiative is aiming to transform (i.e., norms, structures and/or practices).

The gendered drivers of men's violence against women are well-recognised and described, but preventing all family and gender-based violence means looking at other drivers of violence as well and the broader social context in which violence occurs. This includes inequality, stigma, discrimination and marginalisation experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from migrant and refugee communities, people of colour, LGBTIQ+ communities, and people with disability, amongst others. A number of other complementary frameworks address these issues directly, such as *Changing the Picture*, *Changing the Landscape*, *Pride in Prevention* and *Intersectionality Matters*.

*Change the story* also identifies four reinforcing factors that increase the risk and severity of violence against women. While none of these predict or drive men's violence against women on their own, they each play a role in influencing the prevalence or dynamics of violence against women. These are:

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<sup>7</sup> Our Watch (2017) *Counting on change: A guide to prevention monitoring*, Our Watch, Melbourne, Australia.

<sup>8</sup> Our Watch (2021) *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia* (2nd ed.), Our Watch, Melbourne, Australia, p. 36.

1. Condoning of violence in general, where violence is normalised as part of everyday life
2. Experience of, and exposure to, violence, such as childhood exposure to violence
3. Factors that weaken prosocial behaviour, such as heavy alcohol consumption, substance abuse and heavy gambling
4. Backlash and resistance to prevention and gender equality efforts

While the gendered drivers of men's violence against women are a constant underlying presence, the reinforcing factors are context-specific and have influence in particular circumstances.<sup>9</sup> The first three of these reinforcing factors are particularly relevant for early intervention efforts and overlap with risk factors that are associated with family violence and are used to guide responses to family violence. There is inevitable overlap with early intervention efforts, with service systems in place and/or prevention efforts happening in settings that can be leveraged to address these reinforcing factors through early intervention efforts.

Primary prevention works across different settings to challenge the drivers of violence in institutions, organisations and communities and promote healthy and respectful relationships. Priority settings include education (including primary school, secondary school and tertiary education institutions), workplaces, sport, media and in local government.

This creates inevitable overlap with early intervention given the breadth of prevention work that needs to occur across where people live, learn, work, play and socialise. For example, Respectful Relationships Education (RRE) uses the education system as a catalyst for generational and cultural change by engaging schools, as both education institutions and workplaces, to comprehensively address the drivers of gender-based violence and create a future free from violence. RRE takes a 'whole-of-school' approach to engage all associated stakeholders including students, staff and parents and guardians to promote respectful and healthy relationships. As awareness increases about family violence, and what drives it, so too will more individuals recognise or relate to experiences around family violence.

A key element in RRE is schools ensuring staff and students who have experienced or used violence are supported to get the help they need through policies and procedures on how to identify and respond to incidents, suspicions or disclosures that a staff member or student has experienced, been exposed to or used violence.<sup>10</sup> While this is not the core focus of RRE, this is an example of where early intervention is embedded within prevention to support students and staff who may be exposed to family and gender-based violence or may be at a higher risk of doing so.

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<sup>9</sup> Our Watch (2021) *Change the Story*, p. 48; Our Watch (2024) *Evidence Brief 3: Reinforcing factors for gender-based violence*.

<sup>10</sup> Our Watch (2022) *Respectful relationships education toolkit: Overview*, Our Watch, Melbourne, Australia.

In another example, local governments in Victoria have taken significant actions to embed gender equality and primary prevention as a whole-of-council approach. This includes considering the role of councils in creating change, given their positioning as employers, the services they deliver, and their strong community connections and community leadership.<sup>11</sup>

There is significant early intervention already taking place in many of the services that councils deliver, and this overlapping work could be supported to develop further – particularly given the range of touchpoints that councils have with children and families. Councils engage with people across all life stages and in trusted community spaces – e.g. Maternal and Child Health, early childhood services, youth services, libraries, sporting facilities, neighbourhood houses, playgroups and support for older adults and people with disabilities. In addition, councils have identified a range of touchpoints with communities through local laws, animal management and emergency management (which offer many opportunities for early intervention and referral to specialist family violence services).

These are just a couple of examples of a range of opportunities to support early intervention alongside settings where primary prevention efforts are already occurring, to support specific individuals, groups and communities in more targeted ways.

### **Early intervention in the context of response and recovery**

Response and recovery describes initiatives that involve intervening to stop violence from reoccurring and/or escalating, supporting victim survivors during and after their experiences of family violence, and supporting their long-term recovery and healing. This may include supporting victim survivors when they are still experiencing family violence, planning to leave or have already left and can take a variety of forms such as crisis response, case management and specialist counselling. Recovery can take a long time, with a need to focus on ongoing holistic support for victim survivors to sustainably regain their health and wellbeing.

Specialist family violence services place the needs of victim survivors at the centre of their practice. Importantly, response also includes holding people who use violence accountable and facilitating behaviour change to stop violence reoccurring in the future (which is covered in detail in a later section).

One role specialist family violence services hold in early intervention is to maximise the opportunities to prevent escalation and offer support in the first contact with victim survivors. This may involve linking victim survivors in with supports earlier before reaching a crisis point, such as:

- support for children

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<sup>11</sup> Municipal Association of Victoria (2025) *Local government guide for preventing family violence and all forms of violence against women*, Municipal Association of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia.

- access to legal and financial information
- informing and supporting universal services through outreach work and secondary consultations to support victim survivors who have disclosed family violence to these services.

Initial contact around family violence can shape the trajectory of an individual's journey through the service system, and impact whether they get the support they need. Supporting that first point of contact to ensure it is a positive experience is critical.

There is inevitable overlap between response and early intervention, where specialist family violence services by the nature of their response work with adult, children and young people aim to prevent escalation and recurrence of family violence, and address the long-term impacts (including the intergenerational transmission of family violence discussed below).

While specialist family violence services are focussed on dealing with higher levels of risk due to resourcing constraints, the MARAM Framework is designed to create a structured way for a range of different services and sectors to respond to the family violence at all risk levels as early as possible. Specialist family violence services are one part of a service system that includes multiple sectors that are intended to work together to support victim survivors and hold people who use violence to account to change their behaviour. This includes:

- specialist family violence services for victim survivors
- interventions for people using violence and behaviour change services
- specialist sexual assault and harmful sexual behaviour services
- police
- courts
- legal services
- child and family services
- child protection services
- homelessness and housing services
- mental health services
- alcohol and drug services
- aged, ageing and disability services
- universal services.

Professionals across these organisations and service systems have responsibilities to prevent, recognise and respond to adult and child victim survivor safety risks and promote perpetrator accountability and behaviour change within the scope and limitations of their role.<sup>12</sup> These crosscutting services have a key role to play in early

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<sup>12</sup> See Safe and Equal (2025) Service responses to family violence, Accessed 12 February 2025: <https://safeandequal.org.au/working-in-family-violence/service-responses/>.

intervention, to identify and prevent risks of escalation of family violence and where family violence may already be occurring.

Victim survivors' ability to quickly access multi-disciplinary support and practitioners' ability to engage in timely secondary consults and service collaboration and coordination are vital to being able to provide holistic, client-centred support, and contribute towards early intervention efforts. It is critical that crosscutting workforces are upskilled in knowledge and capabilities to identify family and sexual violence risk and have the potential to increase early intervention efforts. This is an ongoing challenge due to demand pressures and funding constraints across social services, including specialist family violence services where services are not able to adequately respond collaboratively to the range of victim survivors' needs and victim survivors face long waitlists if they are not in immediate crisis, or do not get any support at all.<sup>13</sup>

### **Evidence-based risk factors**

The MARAM Framework aims to establish a system-wide shared understanding of family violence and guide professionals across the continuum of service responses as described above, across the range of presentations and spectrum of risk.<sup>14</sup> The Framework identifies evidence-based risk factors that support prescribed workforces under legislation to identify the risk of family violence. Risk is organised under three levels of risk: at-risk, elevated risk, and serious risk.

There are risk factors that are specific for adult or child victim survivors caused by perpetrator behaviours, risk factors specific to children caused by perpetrator behaviours, and risk factors specific to children's circumstances.<sup>15</sup> Risk assessments indicating an opportunity to avoid escalation can be targeted with early intervention efforts. In this context, early intervention efforts could look like referrals to any number of allied services such as alcohol and drugs, mental health, gambling and parenting support services. For example, while these risk factors do not cause violence by themselves, they can be potential areas to guide proactive early intervention efforts:

- Financial difficulties, including financial stress and gambling addiction, particularly of the person using violence.
- People with a history of violence (not only family violence).
- Unemployed and/or disengagement from education.
- People using violence who have a serious problem with illicit drugs, alcohol, prescription drugs or inhalants.

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<sup>13</sup> Safe and Equal (2024) *2025–26 Victorian State Budget Submission*; Safe and Equal (forthcoming) *Specialist Family Violence Demand and Capacity Survey 2024*.

<sup>14</sup> The Victorian Government (2021) *MARAM Practice Guides, Foundation Knowledge Guide: Guidance for professionals working with child or adult victim survivors, and adults using family violence*, Family Safety Victoria, Melbourne, Victoria.

<sup>15</sup> The Victorian Government (2021) *MARAM Practice Guides, Foundation Knowledge Guide*, pp. 27–33.



- Mental illness, particularly depression and suicidality.
- Individuals' isolation from family, friends, their community (including cultural) and the wider community and other social networks and isolation form systemic factors that limit social interaction.
- History of and exposure to family violence, specifically for children and intergenerational transmission of family violence.<sup>16</sup>
- Pregnancy and periods following a new birth.

These risk factors cut across many different parts of the service system. This creates challenges for coordinating early intervention efforts, particularly in a constrained funding environment and increasing demand and capacity pressures across service systems. Sometimes, victim survivors can bounce between different service systems, rather than receiving holistic supports to address complex and multiple needs.

Supporting services to better collaborate in proactive ways should be a core focus of early intervention efforts and requires dedicated funding in addition to investment across prevention and response. Investment in early intervention should include capacity-building and coordination of these workforces to recognise and be able to better identify and respond to risks to prevent escalation and recurrence of family and gender-based violence.

## **Sectors and settings for early intervention**

It is outside of the scope of this paper to examine every setting and sector that has the potential to be involved in early intervention to prevent escalation and recurrence of family violence. The below figure attempts to visually conceptualise the overlap of early intervention work across primary prevention, response and recovery by depicting:

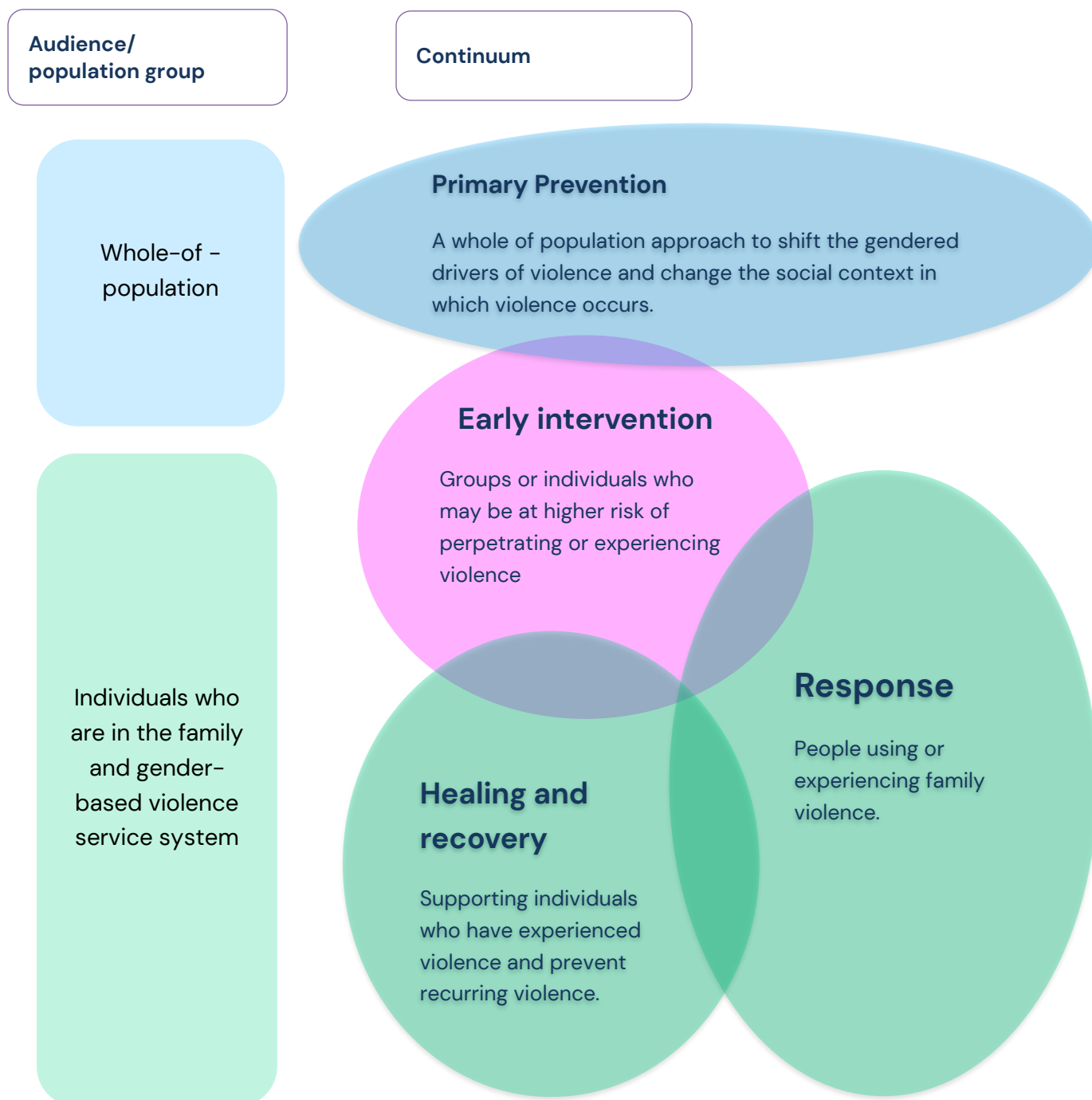
- Primary prevention, as the whole of population approach that sits above the specialist family violence system as it intends to reach everyone where they live, learn, work, play and socialise.
- Response services, that have the opportunity to intervene to stop the recurrence and/or escalation of family violence.
- Healing and recovery, that supports individuals who have experienced or exposed to family violence in their long-term healing and recovery.

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to note here that exposure to violence is considered here as a risk factor, but is in itself a direct experience of family violence, which carries many, if not all, the associated harms, and trauma as directly inflicted violence.



**Figure 2. Conceptualising the overlap of early intervention with other parts of the family and gender-based violence continuum**



## **Early intervention for priority communities**

Individuals and communities can experience multiple forms of discrimination and marginalisation such as racism, sexism, classism, ageism, ableism, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia.<sup>17</sup> These intersecting forms of inequality and oppression increase the risks, severity and prevalence of family violence for a range of communities.<sup>18</sup> Many of these communities have developed innovative initiatives and approaches that integrate primary prevention, early intervention, response and healing and recovery strategies to meet the needs and circumstances of their communities. However, this has not yet been consistently valued, understood and documented.

While we have not been able to comprehensively address existing and potential work being done by and with priority communities, we have been able to include some important examples of positive, integrated approaches and promising models to understand how to address the risks of family violence, the drivers of family violence, while also building broader community wellbeing and connection that contribute to early intervention.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches to early intervention**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches to early intervention address the overlapping drivers of colonisation and systemic racism in addition to the broader gender dynamics of family violence.<sup>19</sup> Victoria's Aboriginal communities have a long and rich history of work that seeks to:

- Integrate early intervention with prevention, response and recovery work
- Focus on healing through strengthening culture and cultural identity, centring connection to Country and community.
- Aims to work towards broad community health and wellbeing outcomes, in which family violence may be one of many.<sup>20</sup>

This holistic and integrated approach is echoed in the Australian-wide *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices)* report led by June Oscar AO, the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner. During consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls across the country:

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<sup>17</sup> Victorian Government (2021) *Everybody Matters: Inclusion and Equity Statement*.

<sup>18</sup> See Our Watch (2025) Quick Facts: Accessed 11 February 2025, <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/quick-facts>.

<sup>19</sup> Our Watch (2018) *Changing the picture: A national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children*, Our Watch, Melbourne.

<sup>20</sup> Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (FVRIM) (2022) *Monitoring Victoria's family violence reforms: Aboriginal-led prevention and early intervention report*, Office of the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor, Melbourne.

*Whether it was in relation to poverty and marginalisation, inadequate housing, lack of safe houses, or family violence support, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls told me [the Commissioner] over and over again that there was insufficient focus on early intervention to help keep families together.<sup>21</sup>*

The report goes on to note:

*Women and girls want to see effective prevention and early intervention services that help prevent or mitigate key traumas such as domestic violence, child removal, incarceration, homelessness, substance addiction, poor mental health and suicide.<sup>22</sup>*

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women consulted, early intervention initiatives that exist are crosscutting and included a range of programs that prioritise a connection to country and culture.<sup>23</sup> Early intervention initiatives provided social and ecological benefits to families, communities, and surrounding environments and support outcomes related to family violence and other intersecting efforts. The *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* suggests a number of early intervention initiatives that range from parenting, life and relationships skills, rehabilitation, counselling and post-incarceration supports, and ensuring a strong community.<sup>24</sup>

Effective early interventions as part of a holistic and integrated approach to family violence need to be culturally appropriate, strengths-based, and trauma informed. Aboriginal community controlled and co-design of services, activities and programs are essential to these efforts to centre self-determination and address inequality.

There are a range of promising and effective interventions in Victoria that demonstrate the multifaceted nature of Aboriginal-led programs that address the cycle of intergenerational violence.<sup>25</sup> These programs have multiple, crosscutting aims to create culturally safe space, build knowledge and understanding of what family violence looks like, how to seek support for family violence, and building skills and overall cultural and community wellbeing.<sup>26</sup> They encompass elements across prevention, early intervention, response and recovery.

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<sup>21</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) (2020) *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing our Future Report*, Australian Human Rights Commission, p. 217.

<sup>22</sup> AHRC (2020) *Wiyi Yani U Thangani*, p. 262.

<sup>23</sup> AHRC (2020) *Wiyi Yani U Thangani*, p. 263.

<sup>24</sup> AHRC (2020) *Wiyi Yani U Thangani*, p. 262.

<sup>25</sup> FVRIM, (2022), *Aboriginal led prevention and early intervention report*; Ubris and Karen Milward (2023) *Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention Mapping Project: Final report*, The Victorian Government and Respect Victoria for the Dhek Dja Partnership Forum.

<sup>26</sup> FVRIM, (2022), *Aboriginal led prevention and early intervention report*; Ubris and Karen Milward (2023) *Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention Mapping Project*.

## **Migrant and refugee communities**

Organisations working with multicultural and faith communities describe delivering primary prevention activities in ways that overlap substantially and productively with early intervention and response.<sup>27</sup>

For migrant and refugee women who experience family violence, there are unique and specific barriers to accessing information and seeking support for family violence. This includes language and communication barriers, financial barriers, dependence on family members, social isolation, fears around deportation and/or visa status, involvement of child protection, and potential ostracization from their community.<sup>28</sup> Migrant and refugee women face barriers in accessing family violence services that they trust and are able to meet their needs. This can be due to a range of reasons such as lack of knowledge of the family violence system, their rights, or what supports are available to them, as well as service providers not being able to respond effectively. In this context, community-led services play an important role.

Settlement and multicultural services play an ongoing role in migrant and refugee women's lives, sometimes for longer than five years from arrival in Australia. They are well positioned to recognise early signs and/or ongoing family violence, respond with care, provide appropriate information on migrant and refugee women's rights in Australia, and provide referrals to appropriate services.<sup>29</sup> This is supported by the workforce and their capability to build rapport and trust with clients, often through the employment of a bilingual and bicultural workforce.<sup>30</sup>

The Multicultural Centre for Women's Health have developed six best-practice principles that can guide sexual assault and sexual violence primary prevention and early intervention initiatives in migrant and refugee communities.<sup>31</sup> These principles are also applicable in the specialist family violence system, and include:

1. Fostering community engagement and dialogue
2. Community ownership of prevention and early intervention activities
3. Centring migrant and refugee women's leadership

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<sup>27</sup> Safe and equal (2024) Foundations for Action: Understanding the primary prevention workforce in Victoria, Safe and Equal.

<sup>28</sup> Vaughan, C., Chen, J., Sullivan, C., Suha, M., Sandhu, M., Hourani, J., ... Murdolo, A. (2020). *Multicultural and Settlement services Supporting women experiencing violence: The MuSeS project* (Research report, 11/2020), ANROWS, Sydney.

<sup>29</sup> Vaughn et al., (2020) *Multicultural and Settlement service Supporting women experiencing violence*, p. 18.

Vaughan, C., Chen, J., Sullivan, C., Suha, M., Sandhu, M., Hourani, J., ... Murdolo, A. (2020). *Multicultural and Settlement services Supporting women experiencing violence: The MuSeS project* (Research report, 11/2020), ANROWS, Sydney.

<sup>30</sup> Vaughn et al., (2020) *Multicultural and Settlement service Supporting women experiencing violence*, p. 69.

<sup>31</sup> MCWH (2024) *Making the Links*.

4. Organisations prioritising diversity, inclusivity and equity at all levels
5. Holistic and integrated education
6. Equitable collaboration and knowledge sharing

Such principles can be used to inform the design, development, and delivery of tailored early intervention activities.

Community-led early intervention initiatives targeting migrant and refugee men who use or are at risk of using family violence describe needing to consider men's experiences of "complex pre-arrival trauma involving war, armed conflict, abuse and witnessing violence as children."<sup>32</sup> This is also a factor outlined in *Change the story* as a reinforcing factor 2 of the gendered drivers of violence.<sup>33</sup> While this does not excuse using violence, there are significant opportunities to support migrant and refugee men to combine therapeutic healing and recovery to support migrant and refugee men's recovery from trauma, alongside building their knowledge of family violence, Australia's legal systems, and education around gender norms and expectations in culturally appropriate ways.<sup>34</sup> This includes programs and initiatives such as men's behaviour change programs to be tailored to migrant and refugee men's specific contexts including acknowledging the impacts of racism and exclusion on many migrant and refugee men's lives in Australia.<sup>35</sup>

## **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Gender Diverse, Intersex, Queer and Asexual (LGBTIQ+) people and communities**

Analyses of LGBTIQ+ health and wellbeing data, such as evidence compiled in the *Rainbow Realities Report*, demonstrates the interrelationship of family violence with other issues such as poor mental health and suicidality, housing and homelessness, and discrimination and inequality for LGBTIQ+ people and communities.<sup>36</sup> These experiences occur in a social context in which rigid gender norms, cisnormativity and heteronormativity drive violence against LGBTIQ+ people and communities.<sup>37</sup> This

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<sup>32</sup> Vaughan, C., Davis, E., Murdolo, A., Chen, J., Murray, L., Quiazon, R., Block, K., & Warr, D. (2016) *Promoting community-led responses to violence against immigrant and refugee women in metropolitan and regional Australia. The ASPIRE Project: Research report* (ANROWS Horizons 07/2016), ANROWS, Sydney, p. 84.

<sup>33</sup> Our Watch (2022) *Change the story*, p. 50.

<sup>34</sup> Vaughn et al., (2016) *Promoting community-led responses to violence against immigrant and refugee women in metropolitan and regional Australia*, p. 84.

<sup>35</sup> Vaughn et al., (2016) *Promoting community-led responses to violence against immigrant and refugee women in metropolitan and regional Australia*, p. 84.

<sup>36</sup> Amos, N., Lim, G., Buckingham, P., Lin, A., Liddel-Hunt, S., Mooney-Somers, J., Bourne, A., on behalf of the Private Lives 3, Writing Themselves In 4, SWASH, Trans Pathways, Walkern Katatdjini, and Pride and Pandemic teams (2023) *Rainbow Realities: In-depth analyses of large-scale LGBTQ+ health and wellbeing data in Australia*, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

<sup>37</sup> Carman, M., Fairchild, J., Parsons, M., Farrugia, C., Power, J., and Bourne, A. (2020). *Pride in prevention: A guide to primary prevention of family violence experienced by LGBTIQ communities*. Rainbow Health Victoria, La Trobe University

points to the need for safe, affirming and inclusive practice across many services to support LGBTIQ+ people's experiences and needs in regards to family violence.

Community-led organisations established by and for LGBTIQ+ communities deliver a mix of programs and services across health and wellbeing domains including family violence, mental health, sexual health and alcohol and other drugs. While resourcing for these programs and services is limited, there is significant potential in supporting early intervention in integrated ways with a focus on individual and community need.

LGBTIQ+ people most commonly disclose family violence to a counselling service or psychologist, and importantly, LGBTIQ+ people that have a regular General Practitioner (GP) are more likely to report experiences of abuse.<sup>38</sup> This suggests that mental and primary healthcare practitioners have a significant role in early intervention initiatives and supporting LGBTQA+ victim-survivors' engagement in specialist family violence services.

## **People with disabilities**

Research focussing on early intervention for mothers and children with disabilities in New South Wales looks at the specific needs that arise from the intersection of disability and family violence.<sup>39</sup> The paper highlights the urgent need for early intervention approaches that are holistic, inclusive, and responsive to the unique experiences of mothers and children with disability facing domestic and family violence. Key opportunities identified include improving coordination between disability and family violence services, adopting flexible and person-centred support models, and strengthening the family violence workforce's understanding of disability. The authors highlight that effective early intervention involves timely, scaffolded planning, personalised support, and building strong local and culturally safe service networks, particularly for Aboriginal families. Children with disability, who are often overlooked, should be recognised as a key target group in these services. Addressing systemic gaps and resourcing challenges—especially in rural areas and within the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)—is essential for improving safety and early intervention outcomes for families with disability. While the New South Wales context differs from Victoria, there are parallels regarding how important it is to explicitly include people with disabilities in early intervention policy and practice.

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<sup>38</sup> Hill, A. O., Bourne, A., McNair, R., Carman, M., and Lyons, A. (2020) *Private lives 3: The health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ people in Australia* (ARCSHS Monograph series no. 122), Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.

<sup>39</sup> Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) (2020) *Violence prevention and early intervention for mothers and children with disability: Building promising practice: Key findings and future directions* (Research to policy and practice, 16/2020). Sydney: ANROWS.

## **Women from priority communities who are pregnant and new mothers**

There are also efforts underway to integrate early intervention with the provision of specialised legal advice and assistance targeted towards women who are pregnant and new mothers. This time-period for women can be particularly risky.

For example, Mabels ('mother and baby engaging and living safely') was launched in 2015 through a Victorian-based Health Justice Partnership between Eastern Community Legal Centre (ECLC), two Victorian local government councils and Boorndawan Willam Aboriginal Healing Service (BWAHS), an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation. Mabels is an ongoing early intervention program providing women attending maternal and child health (MCH) services the opportunity to receive integrated family violence and related legal advice, safety planning, information and referrals, from a family violence lawyer and a family violence advocate<sup>40</sup> Mabels also offers specialised, culturally safe family violence support from BWAHS and access to legal and safety advice from a specialised First Nations advocate, an integral part of Mabels' multidisciplinary team.

Mabels is one of eight integrated programs operated by community legal centres in partnership with MCH service providers across the state. It has been evaluated as an effective early intervention legal response to family violence because it provides a platform that connects women with specialist early intervention family violence and legal support through a universally accessed MCH service before reaching crisis points.<sup>41</sup> This integrated and coordinated approach addresses a system service gap between healthcare and justice by creating easy referral pathways between services and making specialist family violence legal advice more accessible and utilised. This is an effective early intervention initiative as it targeted a critical time when women are at higher risk of experiencing family violence during pregnancy and after birth, and might be identifying or disclosing family violence for the first time.

## **Faith based communities**

There are a number of promising examples of primary prevention approaches and responses for faith-based communities, tailored to particular contexts, that would have early intervention benefits.

For example, the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, in partnership with the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Lifeworks, initiative to support and equip church leaders and communities to respond to and help to prevent violence against women. They do this by providing training and mentoring for church leaders, developing resources and tools for church communities, developing best practice policy and governance procedures, and connecting churches with specialist and local service providers.

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<sup>40</sup> Eastern Community Legal Centre (2018) *"It couldn't have come at a better time": Early Intervention Family Violence Legal Assistance.*

<sup>41</sup> Eastern Community Legal Centre (2018) *"It couldn't have come at a better time".*



The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR) Our Voices for Change community program explores family violence, healthy relationships, parenting for equality, and the role of culture, religion, and community on Muslim women's understandings of gender equality.<sup>42</sup> Through research on Our Voices for Change, focussing specifically on engaging Muslim in family violence prevention, participants highlighted how cultural and religious values should be incorporated into community-led prevention initiatives. Based off this program and associated research, AMWCHR have developed a *Framework for Engaging Muslim Men in the Prevention of Family Violence* that is aimed at upscaling initiatives against family violence by engaging Muslim men and boys.<sup>43</sup> The Framework contains a collection of principles for practice and is intended for use by community workers and/or services considering, or already engaging Muslim men in family violence prevention work. The Framework principles are grounded in the distinct and general experiences of Muslim communities in Australia, so that prevention practice is more relevant and appropriate for those communities.

While these examples are focussed on primary prevention, there are opportunities to learn and build on our understandings of early intervention that is tailored and applicable for different faith communities in Australia.

### **Further examples**

Beyond what has been documented so far, there are a number of initiatives that aim to promote early intervention for particular cohorts and people. These are also often done in combined ways with primary prevention and/or response.

A notable example is early intervention efforts focussed on older people, including in the context of elder abuse. This includes eight elder abuse prevention networks that deliver local action to raise awareness of elder abuse and prevent it from happening using a primary prevention approach. The networks include a range of representatives, including community groups, organisations or businesses that work with or provide services to older people and others.

## **Early intervention in the context of people using, or at risk of using, violence**

The Victorian family violence system's 'web of accountability' aims to hold people using violence to account and stop them from committing further family violence. Interventions that focus on people using violence include initiatives such as men's behavioural change programs (MBCPs) and promising programs like individual case

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<sup>42</sup> Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (2024) *Voices for Change: Engaging Muslim Men in the Prevention of Family Violence*, Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights.

<sup>43</sup> Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (2024) *Framework for Engaging Muslim Men in the Prevention of Family Violence*, Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights.



management, residential-based interventions and online engagement.<sup>44</sup> These interventions aim to prevent people using violence from reoffending with current and/or future partners and address repeated patterns of behaviour.

The National Plan states:

*It is important that there is a diverse range of perpetrator interventions available both in community and justice settings to promote behaviour change and stop violence from occurring again. To ensure safety outcomes are achieved, it is vital that there are services available that respond to the unique and varied needs of perpetrators, beyond men's behaviour change programs. For example, early intervention services engage with people who are at risk of using violence before they do so. Perpetrator interventions can be delivered across mainstream and specialist services, including drug and alcohol services, police interventions, and court mandated interventions and responses.<sup>45</sup>*

MBCPs are a key avenue for stopping violence from reoccurring. The Victorian Government has funded adaptations of MBCPs to respond to the needs of specific communities, as well as funding for alternative interventions. These programs include but are not limited to:

- Aboriginal Healing Programs
- Programs for men from migrant and refugee backgrounds
- LGBTIQ+ intervention programs
- Fathering programs
- Targeted programs for people with complex factors that overlap with their use of violence

However, a more widely-available and diverse range of interventions are needed to reach people who may be at risk of using violence. These need to be tailored and targeted to need, and supported to be adaptive, effective and appropriate.

In Victoria, people using violence have several pathways through which they can engage with interventions, including via:

- **Help seeking behaviour**, which is rare, where there is an opportunity for the range of services a perpetrator might engage with, such as health services, to encourage engagement with a perpetrator intervention.

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<sup>44</sup> Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (FVRIM) (2023) Monitoring Victoria's family violence reforms: Service response for perpetrators and people who use violence, Office of the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor, Melbourne.

<sup>45</sup> Department of Social Services (DSS) (2022) *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*, Commonwealth of Australia, Australia.

- **The Orange Door (TOD) network**, through police interventions, where perpetrators are referred to perpetrator services or voluntarily engage in these services.
- **The justice system (civil and criminal)**, through police interventions, where perpetrators' participation in perpetrator programs is mandated through courts and the corrections system.<sup>46</sup>

Help seeking is rare, but can be influenced by informal interventions from friends, family or community members. People using violence can also come into contact with the interventions through referrals from universal or allied services, or through specialist family violence referral services, e.g. the Men's Referral Service. Engagement with interventions can be voluntary after referral or can be mandated.

Overall, many existing interventions for people using violence are currently only able to reach those who have already used violence, and those already in contact with justice or other service systems. Significant opportunities exist to understand how to 'change the trajectory' for people who are using or at a higher risk of using violence and associated behaviours but who have not engaged with family violence services or the justice system by encouraging them to seek help earlier. This includes more socially and economically privileged men who are currently more able to avoid engagement with these systems and subsequently intervention services. The recent report of the Victorian Inquiry into capturing data on people using violence found that existing data (and therefore program engagement) may be 'biased and skewed towards people in contact with the service and justice systems, who are often the most disadvantaged, stigmatised and marginalised people in the community.'<sup>47</sup>

There are also opportunities to intervene earlier when people using violence, or at risk of using violence, come into contact with the justice system. For instance, early legal assistance provided to respondents of intervention orders can link people who use violence to programs well before actions mandated by courts. For instance, First Step Legal operates a family violence health justice partnership with Better Health Network called the Perpetrator Accountability Project. The program is based on an increasing body of research that indicates that many adult respondents to intervention orders do not understand the conditions that orders contain and that breach rates are particularly high among respondents with mental health conditions and cognitive impairment, including acquired brain injury. The program engages with men to build an

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<sup>46</sup> Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (FVRIM) (2023) *Monitoring Victoria's family violence reforms: Service response for perpetrators and people who use violence*, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee (2025) *Building the evidence base: Inquiry into capturing data on people who use family violence in Victoria*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, p. xxiii, Accessed 7 May, 2025: [https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/495c6a/contentassets/7f19f8acc4ea4bf5af03431740610759/lalsic-60-02\\_building-the-evidence-base\\_report.pdf](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/495c6a/contentassets/7f19f8acc4ea4bf5af03431740610759/lalsic-60-02_building-the-evidence-base_report.pdf)

understanding of and compliance with family violence related orders, as a vital component to the safety of victim survivors.

More broadly, there are opportunities to target and connect early intervention into primary prevention efforts that involve working with men and boys. Men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of violence against women, including family and sexual violence.<sup>48</sup> Many men and boys hold attitudes that are violence supportive and/or promote gender inequality. For example, men aged 18–30 who identify with rigid stereotypes of masculinity are 17 times more likely to say they have hit a partner.<sup>49</sup> Primary prevention efforts aim to challenge and shift harmful masculine stereotypes, such as aggression, dominance and control, and male peer relations and cultures that promote these stereotypes.<sup>50</sup> Our Watch's *Men in focus practice guide* sets out a set of principles and a way to engage men and masculinity in gender-based violence primary prevention work.<sup>51</sup>

There are opportunities to integrate whole-of-population primary prevention activities that engage men and address harmful forms of masculinities with early intervention activities that target specific groups of men and boys. Embedding promising and effective ways to engage in targeted ways with individuals and groups of men and boys to address harmful attitudes around family violence who may be at particular points in their life and/or have specific experiences that contribute to a higher risk of perpetrating family violence. Organisations like The Men's Project's combine promoting more positive forms of masculinities and gender identities with, for example, young men and boys' disengagement from education connecting, family therapeutic responses, or connecting young men and boys with their community through vocational, recreational, and creative activities.<sup>52</sup> In addition, Respect Victoria's Ballarat 'Saturation Model' aims to bring together primary prevention and early intervention in reinforcing ways, using a place-based and community-led approach.<sup>53</sup>

There is an increasing political emphasis on engaging men and boys in violence prevention and early intervention efforts. For example, the Commonwealth government announced in 2024 funding 12 organisations across Australia to create a new early

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<sup>48</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021–22) Personal Safety, Australia, ABS, Accessed 18 February 2025: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/2021-22>.

<sup>49</sup> The Men's Project and Flood, M. (2024) *The Man Box 2024: Re-examining what it means to be a man in Australia*, Jesuit Social Services, Melbourne.

<sup>50</sup> Our Watch (2019) *Men in focus: unpacking masculinities and engaging men in the prevention of violence against women*, Our Watch Melbourne, Australia.

<sup>51</sup> Our Watch (2022) *Men in focus practice guide: Addressing masculinities and working with men in the prevention of men's violence against women*, Our Watch, Melbourne, Australia.

<sup>52</sup> Jesuit Social Services, The Men's Project (2024) "Early Interventions: Programs for men and boys who are at risk of harming others", Accessed 5 February 2025, <https://jss.org.au/programs/the-mens-project/early-interventions/>.

<sup>53</sup> Respect Victoria, Ballarat Community Saturation Model (2024). Accessed April 22 2025: <https://www.respectvictoria.vic.gov.au/ballarat-community-saturation-model>

intervention program for young men and boys aged 12 to 18 years who present with adverse childhood experiences, including family and domestic violence, and who are using or at risk of using family, domestic or sexual violence.<sup>54</sup> Through counselling and therapeutic support, the program aims to assist young men and boys with recovery and healing from their experiences of family and domestic violence; help them avoid choosing to use family, domestic and sexual violence; and build the evidence base on effective approaches to supporting young men and boys.

Early intervention efforts to engage with men and boys could leverage existing service and programs and embed a family violence lens to its core purpose that may address, for example, someone's mental health, alcohol or substance abuse, financial stress or gambling addiction, or unemployment and disengagement from education. Understanding where men and boys who may be at higher risk of perpetrating violence are located and how they are presenting is an important part of coordinating a multisector early intervention approach that reaches them where they are.

## **Children, young people and families**

Engaging with children and young people who experience or are exposed to family violence is a critical juncture to ensure children and young people receive the long-term, trauma informed care and supports that is required to support their long-term recovery into adulthood. Beyond ensuring children and young people's wellbeing, this also contributes to long-term early intervention efforts to stop the intergenerational transmission of family violence for this population that is at high risk of perpetrating and/or experiencing family violence. This kind of early intervention work is also recovery work, to support children and young people's long-term healing from experience and/or exposure to family violence. There are opportunities for greater investment in resourcing tailored early intervention programs and services focussed on children and young people. This includes in the specialist family violence sector, sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviour sector, and children and family services.

Evidence around the broader transmission of intergenerational violence is well established, suggesting that children growing up with parental family violence have an increased risk of experiencing and/or using family violence in their own adult intimate relationships.<sup>55</sup> The 2023 Australian Child Maltreatment study shows that a total of 62.2

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<sup>54</sup> Ministers for the Department of Social Services (2024) 'Early intervention for adolescent young men and boys to end gender-based violence, Media Release,' Accessed 12 February 2025: <https://ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/16121>.

<sup>55</sup> Fitz-Gibbon, K., Meyer, S., Boxall, H., Maher, J., & Roberts, S. (2022). *Adolescent family violence in Australia: A national study of prevalence, history of childhood victimisation and impacts* (Research report, 15/2022). ANROWS.

See also Eriksson, L. and Mazerolle, P. (2015) A cycle of violence? Examining family-of-origin violence, attitudes, and intimate partner violence perpetration, *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 30(6), pp.945–964.

per cent of the Australian population had experienced at least one type of child maltreatment. Exposure to domestic violence was the most common form (29.6 per cent), followed by physical abuse (32 per cent), emotional abuse (30.9 per cent), sexual abuse (28.5 per cent) and neglect (8.9 per cent).<sup>56</sup>

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study also found that in addition to sexual abuse experienced from parents and parent-like caregivers, experiences of sexual violence from other adolescents were significant, and increasing. Based on these findings, the authors make an urgent call for improved and earlier intervention in relation to sexual violence, both at home and more broadly across society.<sup>57</sup> Given the known association between harmful sexual behaviours and early experiences of family violence and sexual abuse<sup>58</sup>, a focus on early intervention is vital for sexual violence prevention.

A growing area of research on young people's use of violence shows the co-occurrence of child abuse and the perpetration of adolescent family violence.<sup>59</sup> In one study, 89 per cent of young people who had used violence in the home reported that they had experienced child abuse. Further, for young people who had both witnessed family violence between other family members and been subjected to targeted abuse had the highest probability of using violence in the home.<sup>60</sup> Many young people surveyed for the study reported that their use of violence was partially attributed to wanting to punish family members who had abused them and to defend themselves from actual or anticipated violence. Impacts of adolescent family violence and the cooccurrence of child abuse are long-term and wide-ranging including emotional and social impacts, diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression, abilities to form health and functional attachments and relationships outside the family unit, and impacts on young people's education. The authors note that "Supporting a young person's recovery from [domestic and family violence] is an essential strategy to reduce the risk of intergenerational violence, and other short- and long-term impacts of violence on children's and young people's lives."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Haslam D, Mathews B, Pacella R, Scott JG, Finkelhor D, Higgins DJ, Meinck F, Erskine HE, Thomas HJ, Lawrence D, Malacova E. (2023) *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report*. Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology, p. 14.

<sup>57</sup> Haslam D et al. (2023) *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report*, p. 18.

<sup>58</sup> Faure-Walker D, Hunt N. (2022) The prevalence of adverse childhood experiences among children and adolescents who display harmful sexual behaviour: A review of the existing research. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, Vol. 15, 1051-1061.

<sup>59</sup> Fitz-Gibbon et al. (2022) *Adolescent family violence in Australia*.

<sup>60</sup> Fitz-Gibbon et al. (2022) *Adolescent family violence in Australia*, p. 12.

<sup>61</sup> Fitz-Gibbon et al. (2022) *Adolescent family violence in Australia*, p. 14.

For young people who disclose using violence in the home, support needs connect with their underlying and/or intersecting experiences of child abuse and related trauma.<sup>62</sup> Specific support needs for adolescents using violence in the home identified included:

- a safe space or place, including alternative and safe housing solutions where necessary
- someone to talk to
- professional support
- emotional self-regulation and self-awareness
- education around abusive behaviours, their impact and the intergenerational cycle of violence
- a supportive school environment/school staff
- a supportive and protective mother
- education for parents and carers.<sup>63</sup>

Research emphasises the critical importance and investment in services and early interventions with children and young people who have experienced family violence, including child abuse and adolescent family violence.<sup>64</sup> These should be tailored for the specific needs of young people who experience intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation.

A number of services, including children and youth focussed services have the potential to be an important site of early intervention and prevent the intergenerational transmission of family violence and intersecting harms that can have long term impacts on children and young people. While prescribed under MARAM, challenges exist in responding to family violence for services such as Child Protection. There is a need to strengthen understanding and capabilities among child-focussed services to respond to family violence and assess family violence risk to work with children in culturally or disability appropriate ways.<sup>65</sup> Failing to do so can substantially impact children and adult victim survivors long term recovery and potentially exacerbate risks for victim-

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<sup>62</sup> 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.

<sup>63</sup> Fitz-Gibbon et al. (2022) *Adolescent family violence in Australia: A national study of service and support needs for young people who use family violence*, pp. 23–30.

<sup>64</sup> See for example, Fitz-Gibbon et al. (2022) *Adolescent family violence in Australia: A national study of service and support needs for young people who use family violence*.

<sup>65</sup> Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (FVRIM) (2022) *Monitoring Victoria's family violence reforms: Crisis response to recovery model for victim survivors*, Office of the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor, Melbourne, p. 34.

Terri Libesman, Paul Gray, Eloise Chandler, Linda Briskman, Aminath Didi and Scott Avery, *Parents with Disability and their Experiences of Child Protection Systems*, Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2023).



survivors.<sup>66</sup> Where there are similar demand and capacity pressures, early intervention efforts in child and family services have also shifted to crisis responses over time.

For Aboriginal victim survivors, engaging with child and family services can be extremely challenging due to the historical and ongoing removal of children from Aboriginal families and communities and overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out of home care.<sup>67</sup> The Yoorrook Justice Commission's report on child protection and Victoria's criminal justice system identifies a number of recurring themes in the child protection system that are shaped by systemic injustice and failures across multiple systems and discriminatory attitudes across services. Many of these themes on the performance of Child Protection for Aboriginal communities are relevant to early intervention efforts to better support Aboriginal children and families. There are opportunities to address some of these challenges by adopting a strengths-based approach that centre Aboriginal self-determination, put tailored supports in place for children and young people and foster an environment where those supports can be accessed.

Fear of removal of children across communities has a significant impact on victim-survivors, where it may serve as a disincentive to women to disclose family violence and seek a specialist family violence response.<sup>68</sup> Where there are complex needs that require corresponding complex support across multiple systems (e.g. family violence, mental health, and alcohol and drugs), such supports require further coordination to halt potential escalation or recurrence of family violence. Across child and family services, the potential for early intervention is significant. For example, this may include:

- Improving collaboration and information sharing between services
- Developing workforce family violence skills and capabilities of child and family services
- Ensuring children and young people receive the appropriate therapeutic care
- Ensuring children and young people have continuing access to education and safe housing
- Improving responses to children experiencing poor mental health and cumulative harm

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<sup>66</sup> FVRIM (2022) *Monitoring Victoria's family violence reforms: Crisis response to recovery model for victim survivors*, p. 34.

Libesman, T., Gray, P., Chandler, E., Briskman, L., Didi, A. and Avery, S. (2023) Parents with disability and their experiences of child protection systems, *Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability*.

<sup>67</sup> In 2021–22, just over one in four First Peoples children in Victoria were the subject of a report to child protection and one in 10 were in out of home care. Yoorrook Justice Commission (2023) *Yoorrook for Justice: Report into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems*, p. 148.

<sup>68</sup> Yoorrook Justice Commission (2023) *Yoorrook for Justice: Report into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems*.

- Improving cultural competency, accessibility and inclusivity of services
- Provide early support to children, families and, specifically, mothers Supporting alternative pathways to care where a protective parent is not able to.<sup>69</sup>
- Following up with families to understand why families do not engage with the supports to which they were referred.<sup>70</sup>

Across services, there are opportunities for distinct early intervention programs and services for children and young people. Specialist family violence services and children and family services have a vital role in this in terms of their own distinct responses, and strengthening collaboration between service systems to ensure children and young people receive earlier support. This requires investment to strengthen collaboration and coordination as well as contribute to enabling children and parents' long-term recovery in culturally appropriate and inclusive ways that avoids escalation of family violence and any unintended outcomes.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to provide a broad overview of the early intervention landscape in Victoria, both in terms of the policy guiding this work and key issues and cohorts to consider. It aims to generate discussions and identify potential areas for further development to support family violence services and allied sectors in leveraging existing work across the continuum, and more strategically coordinate early intervention efforts.

The implications for early intervention are significant. For example, investing in early intervention would contribute to preventing escalation and shifting trajectories of family violence, which has the potential to dramatically reduce demand pressures on the crisis response system over the short- and long-term. Leveraging primary prevention efforts in specific settings for early intervention would support individuals who may be at a higher risk of experiencing, being exposed to or perpetrating family and gender-based violence identify the gendered drivers of violence and ultimately transform norms and practices that condone family violence. Supporting allied sectors and workforces to build their family violence capabilities can help early identification of

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<sup>69</sup> Yoorrook Justice Commission (2023) *Yoorrook for Justice: Report into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems*, p. 19.

FVRIM (2022) *Monitoring Victoria's family violence reforms: Crisis response to recovery model for victim survivors*, p. 34.

Liebsman et al (2023) *Parents with Disability and their Experiences of Child Protection Systems*.

Wood, K., Giallo, R., Fogarty, A., van Daal, E., and Morrison, B. (2024) *The Safe Nest Group pilot project: Early intervention for mothers and infants who have experienced family violence* (Research report, 08/2024). ANROWS.

<sup>70</sup> Yoorrook Justice Commission (2023) *Yoorrook for Justice: Report into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems*, p. 152.



family violence and ensure that individuals are receiving the support they need to address complex needs.

Effective early interventions as part of a holistic and integrated approach to family violence need to be culturally appropriate, strengths-based, and trauma informed. Efforts need to be tailored for individuals and communities that accounts for intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression. Further, throughout this work, there are specific implications for children and young people and people who use violence.

We outline some opportunities below for advocacy to support early intervention.

**We need to build the early intervention evidence base and better understand current early intervention activities including what works to prevent the escalation and/or recurrence of violence to change its trajectory.**

Further work is required to comprehensively map activities and initiatives in Victoria and those that have explicit aims for early intervention across services. This paper sets out a starting point that could be developed further through a mapping project to understand more fully the early intervention landscape across the family violence sector in Victoria – primary prevention, response and recovery.

Better understanding existing work and emerging practice in early intervention will yield important insights into the design of future initiatives to support and grow this work.

**The need for greater investment in early intervention that is coordinated, collaborative and has clear early intervention aims.**

The funding environment means that specialist family violence services work primarily with crisis response. There is little capacity to be able to support individuals who may be at higher risk of experiencing violence but may not present as serious risk requiring immediate crisis response. There is also significant potential to expand, tailor and target earlier interventions to reach people at risk of using violence and ensure effective, available and appropriate responses.

There are opportunities for greater clarity within Commonwealth and state policy on how governments are explicitly investing in early intervention as a key domain in family and gender-based violence responses. The EIIIF is a significant Victorian government initiative aimed at prioritising early intervention and presents an opportunity to consider how government funding has a comprehensive approach to family violence across the continuum. It would be useful to have further detail about existing programs funded by the EIIIF and investigate ways to support collaboration across services to better meet individual and community needs. This includes other initiatives funded under the EIIIF that target children and young people's mental health, the education system, youth crime and youth justice, corrections and homelessness and how connection to family violence early intervention can be cross cutting.

**Evidence-based risk and protective factors can guide where we should focus our attention for targeted early intervention efforts, especially risk factors that could be mitigated by a service response.**

Evidence-based risk factors can be potential areas to guide proactive early intervention efforts. Supporting services to better collaborate in proactive ways should be a core focus of early intervention efforts, and support the capacity and coordination of these workforces to recognise and be able to better respond to family violence risks. This includes efforts such as colocation of specialists across services to enable better collaboration and coordination to address multiple and intersecting risks.

**There is a specific need for workforce development to foster the knowledge and skills that are essential in early intervention, and this would assist in building effective linkages and supporting integration with both primary prevention and response.**

Maximising the potential for early intervention requires a continued focus on building the capability of interrelated workforces in recognising and responding to family and sexual violence and address escalation and recurrence of violence. This includes those working in primary prevention and embedded in a range of sectors and settings (e.g. education, workplaces, sport, local government) and across response and healing and recovery workforces. Workforce development activities are critical to support early intervention efforts and support and sustain collaboration and coordination. It is important to note that additional funding to support early intervention is required, and that existing workforces are not further stretched to include early intervention without resourcing.

## **Early Intervention Survey: Summary of key themes**

Safe and Equal's March 2025 member survey on early intervention in family violence sought to understand the current landscape, challenges, and opportunities in delivering early intervention activities across Victoria. Responses reflected the breadth of existing work, unmet need, and strong sector readiness to expand and innovate to intervene earlier to halt the escalation of violence and prevent recurrence.

21 organisations responded:

- 14 organisations responded undertaking funded early intervention activities.
- 11 organisations responded undertaking unfunded early intervention activities.
- 9 organisations responded undertaking both funded and unfunded early intervention activities.
- 4 organisations responded that they did not undertake any types of early intervention activities.

### **Current Early Intervention activities that receive funding**

Many organisations are delivering effective early intervention programs, often targeted at specific communities and built on strong partnerships. Programs include financial capability training, peer-led models, and integrated supports across housing, mental health, justice and family violence.

- "Our 'Money Mindset' program empowers newly arrived migrant women with financial literacy and employment pathways."
- "We're embedding family violence early intervention into our youth wellbeing programs. It's working, but we need more support to scale."
- "The At-Risk Youth is an early intervention pilot... that targets at-risk young people aged 12-25 who are showing early signs of violence or are exposed to risk factors that make them more likely to use violence."
- "Koori Women's Place is a culturally safe and welcoming space where culture is affirmed and celebrated. Aboriginal women can connect to each other, share stories, heal, and access support and referrals on their own terms. Whether coming into KWP for a cuppa, a cultural workshop, to receive emergency relief, or support to navigate the often-confusing service landscape – KWP is a front door that never closes."

### **Informal and overlapping work**

Many services are engaged in early intervention through broader or adjacent programs, even if not explicitly labelled as such. Services described work that can be considered as early intervention (e.g., identifying risk factors, providing support before crisis, linking clients to services), but said it's often not labelled or funded as 'early intervention.' This includes work done in prevention programs, community education, legal services, maternal and child health, housing, and financial capability support.

- "Our organisation has been doing this work informally for years – identifying early signs and supporting people – but it hasn't been called 'early intervention.'"
- "Our youth mental health and school-based programs have a huge role in preventing escalation—but we need to be recognised as part of the early intervention system."
- "We're working across prevention, early intervention, and response—it's not linear."

Respondents emphasised that the invisible nature of this work puts strain on staff and prevents scaling up successful approaches. There's a clear call to formally recognise and support the early intervention that's already occurring, especially in community-led, intersectional, and culturally safe contexts.

## **Opportunities to enhance early intervention in Victoria**

### **A shared definition and approach to early intervention across the continuum**

The lack of a shared definition or framework for early intervention was cited as a key barrier. Without this, many organisations said they struggle to advocate for funding, track outcomes, or connect with complementary services. A shared definition would help the workforce clearly understand their role in early intervention and how it integrates with prevention and response, and develop expertise and specialisation if necessary. Conceptual and practical guidance around what early intervention looks like in theory and practice was an identified need to support early intervention activities.

- "We need practical tools and a shared understanding so frontline workers know what early intervention looks like in their context."
- "If there was clearer recognition of what early intervention includes, we could measure impact and build the case for support more effectively."

### **Developing and sustaining a workforce for early intervention**

Many respondents emphasised the need for specialist training to equip staff with early intervention skills, particularly in trauma-informed practice, cultural safety, and working with specific populations like young people or LGBTIQ+ communities. There was concern that workforce capacity is already stretched, especially in the response sector. Long-term resourcing is seen as necessary not only to deliver programs but to retain skilled staff and build institutional knowledge.

- "The workforce needs support to recognise and respond early—otherwise we are always in crisis mode."

### **The need for dedicated and sustainable investment in early intervention**

Organisations reported that roles and responsibilities across the continuum of family violence work often overlap, especially in under-resourced environments. This leads to early intervention being absorbed into general service delivery without a clear focus or recognition.

- “We are often doing response work that could be avoided if our early intervention efforts were supported... right now, it’s a blur between the two.”
- “There is work to be continued in breaking down barriers to service entry for priority communities... current thresholds are too high to intervene early.”

Survey responses overwhelmingly highlighted that early intervention efforts are often underfunded, ad hoc, or embedded within other programs not designed for that purpose. This leads to program instability and frequent service disruptions, an inability to plan long-term, scale up, or evaluate impact, and burnout among staff who are stretching beyond funded roles to meet community needs.

- “Most of our early intervention work is self-funded or stitched together with project funding that doesn’t match the scope of the issue.”
- “We use other funding streams to meet the need because we know what works – but that’s not sustainable.”

Sustainable and effective early intervention requires dedicated cross-sector investment — not only in specialist family violence services, but also in the broader systems where early warning signs often surface first, such as in health care, legal services, education, and housing. Survey respondents consistently identified the need for shared resourcing and governance structures that enable these sectors to work together, rather than in silos. Cross-sector investment allows for co-designed, place-based models that are culturally safe, trauma-informed, and responsive to local needs. This includes funding for training, infrastructure, and joint planning so services can identify risk earlier and coordinate responses.

- “If we had dedicated funding, we could formalize the early intervention aspects already embedded in our housing support work.”
- “Early intervention isn’t just a specialist issue — it lives in the systems people already interact with. If those systems aren’t equipped or connected, opportunities are lost.”

Intervening early reduces pressure on crisis services, improves outcomes in housing, health, legal, and education sectors, and contributes to breaks cycles of intergenerational trauma and service dependence

- “It’s cheaper to prevent than to repair. We know what works — now we need government to back it.”
- “Early intervention should be seen as a public value—not just a project.”

Organisations called for funding models that trust community expertise, support innovation, and allow time for deep relationship-building and long-term outcomes. Funders need to move beyond transactional service contracts and embrace flexible, empowering, and culturally appropriate funding structures.

- “The one-size-fits-all model doesn’t work for early intervention. We need funding that reflects the reality of the communities we serve.”

## **Coordination and collaboration**

While effective early intervention relies on strong coordination and collaboration across sectors, many organisations described a landscape marked by informal relationships, limited integration, and siloed efforts. Respondents emphasized the need for shared frameworks, warm referral pathways, and resourced partnerships that allow services to “meet people where they are.”

- “We are part of informal networks... but there isn’t a strong systems understanding about how these programs tie together. That’s where support could really help.”
- We are often relying on individual relationships rather than a coordinated system — when those people leave, the collaboration disappears.”
- “Everyone is doing little bits of early intervention, but we’re not working together in a strategic way — it’s scattered and disconnected.”

Respondents highlighted existing touchpoints with education, justice, health, and housing, suggesting a high potential for cross-sector impact if properly coordinated. Several cited existing collaborations with Aboriginal services, specialist family violence services, and community legal centres and promising cross-sector models like health justice partnerships or local place-based alliance. Several mention managing intersecting support such as Headspace and legal clinics that could be leveraged for early intervention if a coordinated strategy and investment were in place. Collaboration ensures women don’t fall through the cracks of fragmented services, especially when navigating systems like child protection, justice, or housing.

- “Sector partnerships... are vital to ensure Aboriginal women have choice and are supported to move through seamless service pathways across the sector.”
- “Where we do have genuine partnerships — like with maternal and child health or legal clinics — the outcomes are better and more timely. But those partnerships take time, trust, and funding to build.”

There are opportunities to support collaboration by building strong governance structures for early intervention programs based on shared goals and joint delivery.

## **Organisations across the continuum have potential to contribute to early intervention**

Members expressed high readiness to expand early intervention work, especially with a cross-sector focus and adequate resourcing. Responses consistently reflected that staff can already recognise early warning signs of family violence and have the skill sets to respond, but need system-level support to intervene earlier. For example, Improved data sharing across agencies to better identify at-risk individuals and coordinate responses. Further, teams are already collaborating informally with other services and see potential to formalise and strengthen those partnerships.

- “We have the partnerships and experience to do this well, especially with LGBTIQ+ and post-release communities.”

- “Early intervention isn’t just a specialist issue — it lives in the systems people already interact with. If those systems aren’t equipped or connected, opportunities are lost.”

## **Conclusion**

There is clear momentum and commitment across the family violence sector to expand early intervention efforts. The survey responses indicate a sector that is ready, capable, and deeply committed to advancing early intervention, but are held back by fragmented systems, short-term funding, and lack of structural support. There is a clear and urgent call for shared understanding, coordinated frameworks, and cross-sector investment to unlock the potential already present in the community. From legal clinics to maternal health services, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to financial capability programs, the work is informally occurring. Members identified the pressing need for sustainable funding, genuine collaboration, and community-led solutions. If properly resourced and supported, these organisations can move from patchwork efforts to a systemic, integrated approach to early intervention to halt escalation and recurrence of family violence.