FOSTERING SAFETY IN FAMILIES REUNIFYING AFTER VIOLENCE: FINDINGS FROM A PARTICIPATORY STUDY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
ACCP	Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia
AOD	Problematic alcohol or other drug use
Curtin	Curtin University
CPS	Child Protection Services
DSS	Commonwealth Department of Social Services
FDV	Family and Domestic Violence
FSS	Family Support Services
PF	Positive Futures Research Collaboration, University of South Australia
UniSA	University of South Australia

Trigger warning

This report provides accounts of the lived experience of families and young people who have experienced violence, abuse and significant harm. It includes quotes, stories that articulate the challenges they encountered, the impacts of trauma they experienced and the ways that communities, services and systems failed to keep them safe and provide appropriate supports when needed. Readers should be aware that some of the stories may cause discomfort or distress.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Family and domestic violence affects one in ten Australian families. It places family members (particularly women and children) at significant risk and often has lifelong impacts. Of the many services and systems that interact with women, men and children experiencing family and domestic violence is child protection. As we develop our understanding of the needs of women, men and children, we must consider how services and systems can better respond to ensure that the best outcomes can be achieved.

This report overviews findings from a research project that focused on what safety means to mothers, fathers and young people who have experienced family and domestic violence and separation. It accounts for their experiences of violence, separation and reunification and the many personal, interpersonal, service and system-level challenges that they face. It promotes approaches that are underpinned by an appreciation of the lived experience of family violence and a sensitivity to all family members' own conceptualisations of safety.

Participants (including fathers but mostly mothers and young people) in this study conceptualised safety primarily in relation to the absence of violence and the threats of violence but also in relationship to family members feeling emotionally and relationally safe, in having positive identities as parents and children in healthy families, in feeling valued and respected and having some control over their lives. A safe family was one which prevented harm, which fostered security and stability, provided love and care to children, young people and parents and created a sense of belonging and shared problem-solving. To be safe, families often needed formal and informal support networks that were respectful, empowering, enduring and broad in scope.

Many participants reported a lack of safety: not only during periods of violence but also during periods of separation and reunification. In fact, some participants observed that while they felt unsafe during the violence in the home, they were and felt less safe during periods of separation because their broader safety needs were not being met. Instead, some young people and mothers characterised periods of separation as being traumatic and traumatising – something that they believed was rarely appreciated or considered when decisions were made, supports were provided and families were restored. Rather than being supported to continue to care for their children, mothers, in particular, often encountered a system that was de-humanising, disrespectful and problematised their relationships with their children and compounded their lack of safety.

Recognising that many families affected by violence have been exposed to intergenerational and ongoing adversity (including childhood abuse, ongoing mental health and alcohol and other drug issues, social isolation and financial insecurity), this report stresses the need for services and systems to assess and respond the breadth of family's needs prior to and during periods of separation and after reunification. It recommends that reunification is not seen as an end-point but as one step towards family recovery: when mothers, fathers and children and young people are managing or have overcome the impacts of childhood difficulties and are achieving family health and wellbeing.

Within the sample, participants asserted that reunification was only safe and successful when all family members agreed to and were prepared to return home. It was unsafe when individuals felt pressured to return, particularly when it felt as though they had no other choices. Concerns about having sustainable housing, financial security and ability to provide environments in which children could grow and develop were all reasons why some mothers and young people returned home and a lack of appropriate supports, a failure to identify violence and other risks and a failure to provide strategies for managing behaviours, restoring relationships and fostering stability all compromised the success of reunification and individual family members' safety.

This report recommends that reunification is not seen as an end-point but as one step towards family recovery: when mothers, fathers and children and young people are managing or have overcome the impacts of childhood difficulties and are achieving family health and wellbeing.

Family recovery was achieved when families' safety needs were met, when the impacts of past traumas and difficulties (including those that coalesced around violence, those experienced during separation and those that emerged as families interacted with services and systems) were overcome and when families experienced security and stability, restored control over their lives and enjoyed what they considered 'normality': in their relationships, their functioning and their daily activities. This required enduring, responsive and empowering formal and informal supports and services that meet the needs of individuals and the family as a whole.

Background

Family and domestic violence is a major health and welfare issue that has lifelong impacts for survivors. It has been estimated that 2.2 million Australian adults have been the victims of physical or sexual violence (ABS, 2017). Women and children are disproportionately affected, as are people who are Aboriginal, have a disability, and who live in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas (AIHW, 2019).

Family and domestic violence has been shown to affect adult survivors' health and mental health, their financial security, their substance abuse, social connectedness, and identities. Similarly, children's exposure and direct experiences of family violence and physical abuse have profound impacts. Studies have demonstrated poorer outcomes related to child development, attachment, health and wellbeing, education, and challenges experienced during adolescence and adulthood.

Families affected by violence often interact with a broad range of services including family violence and women's services, homeless refuges, and education, health, child protection and welfare systems. Often these services provide invaluable assistance, however families' accounts often point to a range of practical, systemic, and structural problems that limit the extent to which their needs are met. In worst case situations, services and systems fail to improve outcomes and sustain victims of violence and abuse in unsafe relationships and households or intervene in ways that cause distress and prolonged family separation.

Families experiencing violence are often separated due to child protection intervention, parental incarceration and family breakdown (Humphreys, 2007). In some cases, this improves family and children's safety but in others it causes great distress and harms familial relationships. Studies have shown that mothers, in particular, are often separated from their children for undue periods of time and that reunification often occurs with little or no planning.

Although there is a growing body of literature which explores how families, mostly mothers and children, experience violence, there are limited accounts of how these families engage with child protection systems due to statutory interventions from separation to reunification nor ways that services and systems can foster children and family's emotional and psychosocial safety before, during and after reunification after violence.

Nature and scope

The Australian Centre for Child Protection and the Positive Futures Research Collaboration, with colleagues from the Schools of Social Work at the University of South Australia and Curtin University, were commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Social Services to conduct a study to explore Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families' experiences of separation and reunification in the context of family and domestic violence.

This study attempts to answer the research questions:

- What does safety mean in the context of FDV reunification?

- What are consumer-informed elements and indicators of safe reunification?

- To what extent are these elements important / implemented and what enables and hinders safe practice in FDV, CP, and justice services?

- What guidance would consumers (young people and families) give to practitioners to improve safe reunification?

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

This report provides an overview of the major themes and findings from the 50 interviews conducted with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal mothers, fathers and young people aged 15-25 years. A separate report includes findings from focus groups with service providers.

The current study was participatory in nature and aimed to capture the lived experiences of those most affected by family and domestic violence rather than relying on the observations of proxies, such as workers and policymakers and data gathered from datasets, case files, and outcome reports. Participants were recruited through a variety of services working directly with families, including those that had a specific focus on family and domestic violence and reunification. Aboriginal families were often recruited through community-controlled organisations and young people through specialist youth programs.

Participants were asked to provide an account of the nature and their experiences of family and domestic violence, separation due to violence and reunification, and to identify the strengths, weaknesses and challenges of the services, approaches and systems they encountered. The strength of this approach was that the study was able to capture fuller insights of families' experiences compared with other studies that examined particular points in time (i.e. during periods of violence) or particular interventions (i.e. child protection separation).

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a way that afforded participants choice and control over their stories, reduced the likelihood of them experiencing adverse emotional outcomes and positioned them as experts rather than victims. Qualitative interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed. The findings were presented to an Adult Advisory Group and two Aboriginal Leadership Groups for clarification and further exploration.

FINDINGS:

Experiences of family and domestic violence

The sample did not attempt to be representative but included families with diverse lived experience of family and domestic violence who had interactions with the formal service system. Violence was often experienced in families where parents had adverse childhoods, marked by intergenerational trauma, exposure to violence, problematic alcohol or other drug use, and parental and child separation and family breakdown. Many were also struggling to cope with poverty, social isolation, and financial instability, were experiencing grief and loss, and had multiple past conflicts, separations, and repartnerings.

Those who used violence included mothers' partners, children's fathers, and, in a small number of cases, mothers. Often the violence was directed just towards mothers, sometimes towards both mothers and children, and in rarer cases towards just children or towards fathers.

The violence was most often physical and emotional but was also manipulative, exploitative, and controlling. In many cases it was both prolonged and chaotic. Survivors experienced physical injury, reported depression, anxiety, and enduring mental health difficulties, and were often isolated from extended family, friends, and formal and informal supports. Young people's education was often affected, as were their relationships with parents and siblings, particularly when they assumed roles to protect and care for mothers, brothers, and sisters during periods of violence and beyond. Mothers reported feeling shame and guilt and feeling like failures as parents — a negative sense of identity that was sometimes reinforced by their abusive partners and by their families, friends, and communities.

Experiences of separation

Families were often separated due to family and domestic violence. In some instances, parents or young people left home to escape the violence. Many of the mothers were then separated by child protection agencies who believed that the mothers were unable to protect their children or provide them with care and nurturance. In some instances, mothers and their partners (including children's biological fathers as well as new male partners) remained together while children were removed. A smaller group included parents who were incarcerated and whose children were placed into care.

As the ways that families separated varied so did their experiences of separation. For some young people, living independently or in care provided them with the safety and stability they sought.

However, many parents and young people reported that periods of separation were marked by a lack of safety and ongoing adverse experiences. Parents, particularly mothers, reported that they experienced ongoing fear for their children, felt disempowered as parents, and had an ongoing and compounded sense that they had failed as parents, despite considerable evidence to the contrary. They recalled that this was reinforced by their experiences with workers and agencies from child protection, family welfare, and broader human service organisations who engaged in victim-blaming and held them accountable for their partners' violence which was out of their control.

Young people characterised their time in care as being traumatic, particularly as they were separated from protective parents and from siblings and experienced instability of placements, abuse and violence, and a general lack of autonomy. They often prioritised supports for their families at home (assistance to prevent further violence, help for parents to escape, and treatment for alcohol and other drug problems) over the psychological supports which were sometimes offered. They wanted the causes of their problems, rather than the symptoms of them, to be resolved first.

Periods of separation were often marked by structural and systems issues that elongated the time that children and young people were away from their families. Poor coordination of services, misunderstandings about mothers' capacity to provide for their children and siloed practice approaches culminated to restrict family restoration. For example, mothers who escaped violence reported having their children removed because they could not provide them stable accommodation but were not able to obtain supported housing because they didn't have their children with them. Mothers and young people were resentful of these system failures which sustained children in unsafe arrangements and further problematised their relationships.

Although most of the families characterised periods of separation in negative terms, some reported that the experience provided them the motivation and the means to change their circumstances. Some mothers, for example, used the statutory intervention as a way to successfully distance themselves from their partners. Both mothers and fathers also reported

that they valued the opportunity to enrol in parenting programs and education, in getting help to deal with alcohol and drug services, and to secure suitable accommodation. The extent to which the services and systems enabled this to occur was varied. Even when families appreciated the various supports, they generally believed that preventative assistance (particularly removing a violent partner or securing alternate arrangements for escaping) should have occurred before or instead of having a child removed. Mothers and young people also strongly argued that the system should be more informed about the dynamics of family and domestic violence and be resistant to responses that were victim-blaming or that punished mothers for their partners' violence.

Reunification

Although many families (and child protection) had a stated goal of "reunifying" this was not a universal expectation. Many mothers and young people did not want to restore relationships with violent partners or fathers, although some wanted to reconnect with families in new ways and on their own terms. Some young people did not want to return home but wanted ongoing relationships with siblings and their mothers. Some mothers wanted to be reunited with their partners when they believed that drastic changes had been made that meant they could be safe.

Families reunified in a number of different ways at different times. It was clear, however, that although families celebrated having individual children returned their families were not "whole" again until all family members who had been separated or estranged and could safely return were reunited. In practice, this often took multiple attempts and many months to occur. Many of the families reported multiple attempts to "reunify" and posited that to be successful, they needed for them and their children to be well-prepared, to feel like they had some choice and control, that they were supported and guided to deal with emerging difficulties and for all family members to be able to communicate their needs and wishes safely. As the period of separation was often traumatic for parents and young people, successful reunification required assistance to deal with the impacts of both exposure to violence and challenges encountered during periods of separation.

Family recovery

For many, "reunification" was cast as an important but not final step in their family's journey. Instead, they recognised that there was a period after reunification when the family reacclimatised and needed to overcome the impacts of violence and separation and to be given the support to mediate conflicts and challenges as they arose. "Family recovery" was the ultimate goal for many of the families who wanted to feel "normal" again: in their relationships, in their sense of self, and in their family interactions. For some this was best indicated when children were happy and healthy, when parents felt empowered and confident in the parenting and the family enjoyed shared activities that were positive and affirming. Formal assistance was often required during this period, to thwart re-emerging issues, to help families heal and grow, and for all family members to be able to express their needs and have their needs met. Without such assistance, mothers and children experienced ongoing violence, family conflict and interpersonal difficulties.

For the purposes of this study, we conceptualise family recovery as the last step for families reunifying after family violence and advocate the need for services and systems to be in place to ensure that families are able to recover from their experiences of violence and separation. The steps towards recovery are included in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Steps towards recovery

Family dispersal and separation		Attempts at family reunification		Successful reunification		Family restoration		Family recovery
• Where parents left • When parents split up • Where children were removed • Where parents were involuntarily separated	→	• When familes spent time together • When 'reunification' was attempted, failed and children were again removed	→	• When children or parents returned safely and successfully	→	• When families started to heal, to confront and manage challenges and to re-acclimatise to living together	→	• When a sense of stability and normality were achieved, *violent parents had addressed their behaviour,* impact of FDV and separation were being resolved and families were able to manage independently. Families have a sense of normality.

Exposure to family and domestic violence has life-long impacts for children and young people who often experience difficulties in forming respectful and safe relationships and positively parenting their own children. The normalisation of violence, entrenched expectations that violence is inevitable in relationships and ongoing feelings that women have lesser worth were all impacts that played out when young people formed partnerships of their own. A lack of positive parenting role models and a lack of resources also restricted young women from being the types of parents they would like to be. Proactive, targeted supports that focused on the prevention of intergenerational family violence and child protection involvement was considered necessary.

Although much has been achieved in understanding the needs and experiences of families, mothers, fathers and children exposed to family and domestic violence there was evidence that many of the services and systems with which participants interacted still did not fully appreciate or respond to its causes or impacts. Better and new ways of supporting families during periods of violence, separation and reunification are sorely needed.

1. BACKGROUND

Family and domestic violence is one of the greatest health and welfare issues facing Australian families. In 2018, the AIHW identified that one in six women and one in 16 men had been subjected, since the age of 15, to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former partner (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). The Australian Institute of Family Studies reports that 72% of mothers who reported experiencing physical violence before separation reported that their children had witnessed this (Kaspiew et al., 2015).

Exposure to family violence can have long-lasting, detrimental effects on children and young people (Evans, Davies, & DiLillo, 2008; Gewirtz & Edleson, 2007; Sousa et al., 2011), mothers, and family units (Chung & Wendt, 2015). Previous research shows that family violence contributes to poor physical, emotional, social, psychological, and economic outcomes (Franzway, Moulding, Wendt, Zufferey, & Chung, 2018; McTavish, MacGregor, Wathen, & MacMillan, 2016; Naughton, 2017; Noble-Carr, McArthur, & Moore, 2017). Children, in particular, have shown to be at increased risk of experiencing emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, are more likely to develop emotional and behavioural problems, and be exposed to many other adversities within their childhoods that often affect them into adulthood, including the increased risk of either being victims of or perpetrating violence within their own relationships (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008; Noble-Carr et al., 2017; Richards, 2011).

Domestic and family violence is a significant issue impacting Indigenous communities. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2014-2015 (ABS 2017), indicated just over one in five (22.3%) of Indigenous people aged 15 years and over had experienced physical or threatened physical violence in the last 12 months. It is recognised that violence experienced by Aboriginal people has multiple and complex causes, and must be understood in the context of colonisation, dispossession as well as the implementation of assimilationist and protectionist policies (Cripps & Adams, 2014; Cripps & McGlade, 2008). The impacts of intergenerational trauma have been highlighted in the literature and play a part in facilitating lateral violence and both exacerbating family violence and limiting the success of effective family support interventions (Cripps & Adams, 2014; Cripps & McGlade, 2008; (Higgins, Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2007)).

1.1 The link between child protection and family and domestic violence

In Australia and elsewhere, the relationship between family violence and child protection is significant (Herrenkohl, Sousa, Tajima, Herrenkohl, & Moylan, 2008; Holt et al., 2008). Although exposure to family violence has only relatively recently been considered a form of child abuse, the co-occurrence of family violence and physical and emotional abuse and harm has been clearly demonstrated for some time (Herrenkohl et al., 2008; Osofsky, 2003).

In many instances, when family and domestic violence is present and when the children are exposed to this violence either as direct victims or when a parent is deemed unable to prevent children's exposure, a removal from the family unit can occur. This removal can be short-lived, or can be over an extended period, until a child reaches 18 years of age. During periods of separation, families need to demonstrate that the risks of exposure to violence have been ameliorated and that they can protect their child from harm.

1.2 Reunification

In the context of child protection, reunification describes the process through which children are returned to their parents' care after periods during which they are cared for by relatives (kinship care), foster carers or staff in residential care services. Sometimes this alternate care is formal (when care arrangements are made by the State, usually described as "Out of Home Care") and informal (when care arrangements are made by the young people or their families).

Although reunification is often a goal for child protection systems (Salveron, Arney, & Bromfield, unpublished), studies in Australia and overseas have highlighted the fact that the process can be challenging and complex with many children remaining in care due to failures to successfully and safely reunify (Biehal, 2006; Sinclair, 2005). Reunification can also occur at the expiry of a voluntary agreement or a short-term court order when an extension has not been sought.

The length of time that a child remains in formal or informal care and whether they can be successfully reunified is often influenced by a number of factors, including: the age at which the child is removed (older children are less likely to be reunified with their families); whether the child has a disability or demonstrates challenging behaviours; and whether the parent has ongoing challenges such as mental health issues or problematic alcohol or other drug use (Fernandez & Lee, 2013).

Families can also be separated when one or both parents are incarcerated for crimes related to family and domestic violence. Although greater attention has been focused on the needs of families during periods of incarceration and the transition of prisoners back into the community, much is still unknown about what makes this reunification safe for all family members, and how families experience these transitions (Hayden, Gelsthorpe, & Morris, 2016).

The literature focusing on reunification broadly and reunification in cases of family violence is scant at best (Panozzo, Osborn, & Bromfield, 2007; Salveron et al., unpublished).

Reviews of the existing literature, which tends to not have a focus on reunification in the context of violence, show that although reunification post child-removal often has positive effects for children and young people, some studies have suggested that when the system fails to provide adequate and appropriate supports, negative outcomes follow (Taussig, Clyman, & Landsverk, 2001). In the context of family violence, research suggests that premature or inappropriate decisions to reunify families can compromise children's safety and exacerbate their risks to abuse and other forms of harm (Fernandez & Lee, 2013). These challenges are compounded when children are restored after periods of parental incarceration without appropriate support (Hayward & DePanfilis, 2007).

Positive reunification requires supports to be in place prior to, during, and for a sustained period after child restoration and is often reliant on rigorous assessment, considered planning, and ongoing follow-up support (Biehal, 2006; Bromfield, Higgins, Osborn, Panozzo, & Richardson, 2005; Hayward & DePanfilis, 2007). Studies have also pointed to the important part that family contact[1] plays in the reunification process with the quality of the relationship between carer and parent, caseworker and carer, and caseworker and parent as a predictor of positive outcomes (Fernandez & Lee, 2013). The role of sustained relationships between children and their biological families (Delfabbro, Barber, & Cooper, 2003), particularly for families with an incarcerated parent (Hayward & DePanfilis, 2007), has also been identified as critical in the reunification process.

Other factors that appear to influence the success of family reunification include the level of preparation and support provided to children who have been removed for reunification, the living situation of families, their access to income support, and the level of formal and informal support surrounding children, parents and the family unit through the reunification journey (Delfabbro et al., 2003; Noble-Carr et al., 2017). The availability, accessibility, and willingness of parents to engage with parenting, alcohol and other drug treatment and violence prevention programs also influences success (Salveron et al., unpublished). In addition, post-reunification

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[1] In the context of family separation, family contact describes the ongoing communication between children and parents or others who are important in the lives of children. Contact can be formal or informal and often is facilitated through support services, particularly when contact is ordered through the courts (see: Bullen, Taplin, Kertesz, Humphreys, & McArthur, 2015 for more)

support has been shown to be vital for families, although a lack of enduring programs has been highlighted within the literature (Panozzo et al., 2007).

Reunification of First Nation children are more successful when parental and community capacity are promoted and strengthened, when communities were full of appropriate and culturally responsive services and supports that increased community empowerment and capacity. On the other hand, a lack of culturally appropriate services, hesitancy of families to seek support due to fears of child welfare intervention and mental health difficulties all appeared to hinder progress (Toombs, Drawson, Bobinski, Dixon, & Mushquash, 2018). Ongoing support and intensive and sustained family content is particularly important in remote communities (Robinson, Mares, & Arney, 2017).

Although there has been a growing interest in the experiences of children, young people, mothers, fathers, and families experiencing family violence, there is limited research that directly engages with families to explore their needs, experiences and challenges within the broad human service system and in the child protection system more specifically (Noble-Carr, Moore, & McArthur, 2019). At the same time, there has been limited research focusing on these 'end-users' experiences of reunification (Fernandez, 2013), particularly when family violence is a factor. Studies have primarily considered the impacts and nature of violence but have not always considered how families understand and experience safety during periods of separation and reunification.

2. PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Safety, FDV and Reunification project was established in 2018 as a partnership between the Australian Centre for Child Protection, the Positive Futures Research Collaboration and the School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy at the University of South Australia and the School of Social Work at Curtin University, and is funded by the Commonwealth Government Department of Social Services.

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

This study attempts to answer the research questions:

- What does safety mean in the context of FDV reunification?

- What are consumer-informed elements and indicators of safe reunification?

- To what extent are these elements important / implemented and what enables and hinders safe practice in FDV, CP and justice services?

- What guidance would consumers (young people and families) give to practitioners to improve safe reunification?

The project aims to support policy and practice which is informed by evidence including the findings from research, the lived experience of families and young people, and the clinical and service system expertise of practitioners. With this aim in mind, the research team proposed a series of research activities (see Figure 2) including:

- A **Rapid Evidence Assessment** interrogating the existing evidence related to programs providing support to families through reunification in the context of Family and Domestic Violence. The REA focused on programs that had been evaluated.

- A **Targeted Synthesis of the Literature** analysing the articles identified through the REA which were not focused on evaluations but highlighted the needs of families experiencing FDV through reunification.

- **Qualitative Interviews (n=50)** with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal mothers, fathers, and young people who had lived experience of FDV, separation due to violence (including child protection and justice), and who were successfully or unsuccessfully reunified. These interviews attempted to understand what safety means to parents and children in the context of FDV, what families want and need when reunifying and the challenges and enablers that have facilitated good outcomes for all family members. These interviews are intended to yield a series of client-informed practice elements to guide family support work.

- **Focus groups (n=10)** with practitioners, managers and other key stakeholders to clarify the client-informed practice elements and to explore how they are and may be used to guide practice. Focus groups built upon the interviews and confirm and extend practice elements.

This report focuses on the findings from the qualitative interviews and incorporates findings from the rapid evidence assessment and literature reviews in the introduction. A second report will include the findings from the focus groups with practitioners.

Figure 2: Methods

2.1 The scope and nature of this report

This report provides a brief overview of the methodology and methods utilised by the research team to explore issues of safety for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families reunifying after periods of separation, and to highlight some of the key findings from interviews with young people, mothers, and fathers.

The background and methodology sections (sections 1-3) place the study in the context of previous research and provide a rationale for and overview of the ways in which the study was conducted.

Sections 4-7 present the findings of the study. These sections include an overview of how young people and parents conceptualise safety and what they believe they need to be safe throughout the reunification process. They also include a discussion about the types and nature of supports that they found enhanced their safety as well as the challenges that they encountered throughout the reunification process. Section 8 draws together the research findings as they relate to the key research questions.

3. OUR APPROACH

This study aims to explore safety for families experiencing violence, separation, and reunification. The sample included Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adults and young people who were experiencing ongoing trauma but who had also been silenced within their families, communities and with the policy and service landscape. In developing our approach, our research team needed to balance the rights of individuals to participate and their need to be protected from further traumatisation and marginalisation. In this section, we provide a rationale for the approach we took in engaging families and some of the safeguards we put into place to ensure that they could participate safely.

3.1 The value of engaging people with lived experience in family and domestic violence research

This study was underpinned by a commitment to ensuring that those most affected by family and domestic violence (including young people, parents, and families) were given opportunities to reflect upon and give voice to their experience.

Recognising that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people may experience periods of violence in ways that are similar but often different to each other and that Aboriginal families are more likely to experience both family violence and separation due to statutory intervention (Cripps & Adams, 2014; Cripps & McGlade, 2008), a concerted effort was invested to ensure that Aboriginal families had a voice in the study and that their participation was culturally safe.

Traditionally, research on families' experiences of violence has primarily engaged mothers who were asked to report on the nature and impacts of violence for themselves and for their children. The inclusion of children and young people in family violence research has only occurred in relatively recent times (Noble-Carr et al., 2019), and has demonstrated that children and young people often experience violence differently to their parents who cannot fully account for the ways that violence impacts children, their sense of safety, their relationships, and their overall health and well-being (Houghton, 2015).

The team's inclusion of young people in the study reflects an established position that when conducted ethically and appropriately, young people can provide unique insights into social challenges affecting families and, as key stakeholders in the provision of policies and programs, young people have a right to have their say (Moore, Saunders, & McArthur, 2011; Walsh, Hewson, & Shier, 2008).

Importantly, women and young people who have experienced family violence are represented in this study not only as witnesses or victims but also as experts on family violence, with unique insights into the nature and experience of violence and their engagement with the service system (Nabi & Horner, 2001). As will be seen, the system often has cast survivors of violence as complicit actors who failed to protect their children from harm or exposure to traumatic episodes. Our research (and others' see Wendt, Buchanan, & Moulding, 2015) demonstrates that parent survivors (mostly mothers) take active steps to protect their children but are not ultimately responsible for their partner's (mostly fathers) violence.

Fathers who use violence, as well as a small number of mothers who use violence, were also invited to participate in the study to reflect on the ways that the system may have better supported them and their families during periods of violence, separation, and reunification. Although previous literature has highlighted the challenges of engaging men who use violence in participatory research projects (Kelly & Westmorland, 2016), the research team believed that it was important to draw from their experiences alongside that of other family members. However, in recognition of the fact that it is women and children who are most often the victims of FDV,

particularly serious violence, and coercive control, and that it is they who are often rendered voiceless in these contexts, we have privileged their voices and experiences within this report.

Contradictory accounts

As will be demonstrated throughout the report, there were occasions when participants from the same family had contradictory accounts of their experiences. In a number of families, fathers characterised the level of violence that they used and the impacts that violence had on their families as being as lesser than that presented by their partners or children and appeared to minimise the violence and its impacts on victims and survivors. We have included quotes from fathers verbatim, and have identified when the accounts of different family members stressed contradictory versions of events or impacts.

3.2 Interviews with Mothers, Fathers and Young People

Semi-structured interviews were conducted separately with mothers, fathers[2] and young people. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a location that was negotiated with participants and were recorded with the participants' consent. Participants were invited to complete the interview with a support person present.

During the 90-minute interview, mothers, fathers and young people considered the following questions:

1. What does safety mean in the context of family and domestic violence?

2. When have you and your family experienced safety or a lack of safety?

3. How does family and domestic violence affect families and what does this mean for services working with young people and families?

4. How is safety supported during periods of separation?

5. In what contexts is reunification safe for young people and families affected by family and domestic violence?

6. How might services and systems be improved to ensure safe reunification for young people and families affected by family and domestic violence?

Interviews with young people included a series of youth-friendly activities to enable them to speak openly and safely about their experiences. Activities included:

- **Safety Clouds** through which young people could help articulate what it means to be safe and unsafe.

- **Family Trees** which helped young people discuss the nature of family and their relationships with parents, siblings and other relatives.

- **Life Maps** which plotted their experiences of FDV, being and feeling safe, separation and reunification and their hopes for the future.

- **Sharing My Story** which allowed young people and researchers to identify any safety concerns and negotiate how researchers might respond to any disclosures of harm.

These tools were utilised as a way of opening up discussions with young people in safe ways.

At the end of each interview, researchers spent time 'checking in' with participants to ensure that they were feeling emotionally safe. In some instances, research team members helped

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[2] NOTE: All of the men interviewed in this study had children. However, some of the men who were interviewed were not the biological father of the young people interviewed.

participants identify a support person who they might talk to if they had felt distressed during the interview and actively linked them with this assistance. After interviews during which participants raised particularly sensitive or potentially discomforting material, researchers contacted participants within a week to ensure that they were emotionally safe and supported.

3.2.1 Ethics

Young people and parents in families affected by family and domestic violence are a group who may need protections to be in place to ensure that their participation in research is safe (Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Houghton, 2015). In designing the study, the research team spent some time considering the ethics of research with young people and families and implemented a series of safeguards to ensure that potential harms were minimised. What follows is an overview of some of the steps and safeguards implemented throughout this study which was conducted with the approval of the South Australian Aboriginal Health Research Ethics Committee (Approval 04-18-781) and was ratified by the University of South Australia, Curtin University, and the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee.

Cultural safety

Given the project included a specific aspect relating to the experiences of Aboriginal families, two Aboriginal Advisory Groups provided cultural guidance to inform the ways that researchers engaged with Aboriginal young people and parents and enabled cultural safety. These groups were made up of Aboriginal leaders, experienced policy makers and practitioners, and representatives of key Aboriginal services. They met at critical points throughout the research process and provided guidance on how to represent Aboriginal participants in this report.

Minimising harm

The research team was acutely aware that involvement in a study that focuses on family and domestic violence can present some risks for young people and parents. Previous studies have pointed to the fact that participation in interviews may cause participants some discomfort or distress, and can be dangerous if an offending parent or partner becomes aware of the participant's involvement in the study or is present when an interview is being conducted (Cater & Øverlien, 2014; Ellsberg & Heise, 2002).

As such, the team developed several safeguards to minimise these risks and to respond to any concerns that arose.

Firstly, the team developed a recruitment strategy which included the forging of relationships with services that were in a position to provide support to participants before and after their interview and, if requested, to sit in on interviews to provide assistance. Services who were unable to provide such assistance were not asked to recruit participants.

In addition, the team modified a screening tool developed for a study on safety in residential care (Moore, McArthur, Roche, Death, & Tilbury, 2016). This tool, which was used before commencing interviews, attempted to identify recent life events or stressors (such as incidents of family violence, abuse, or other traumatic events) that might exacerbate the risks of experiencing discomfort or distress and provide participants the opportunity to self-select out of the study. The tool is included in Attachment 1.

Interviews were conducted in places that were negotiated between the researchers and participants. Some interviews were held in rooms at a family support or FDV service, others in public spaces (such as libraries or community halls). The sites were selected as they were places where individuals felt safe and supported, and where the risk that an offending parent might walk in was minimised.

A distress protocol was also modified for the project and drew on the researchers' collective experiences as social workers and youth work practitioners to appropriately intervene if a participant was demonstrating discomfort and to respond if they became upset or distressed. This protocol (included in Attachment 2) afforded participants the opportunity to work with the researcher to locate appropriate supports and outlined the ways that the researcher might assist the participant to get help.

Recognising that the impacts of participation in an interview focusing on family and domestic violence may not be immediately visible, researchers contacted participants within 48 hours to "check-in" as to whether they had experienced adverse reactions to their interviews and provided support, when necessary, to assist affected participants to find appropriate support.

As researchers, social workers and mandatory reporters with a commitment to ensuring the safety of children, young people and families, the research team also developed a shared approach to identifying and responding when they had concerns about participants and their families. This approach balanced the researchers' need to act, with the participants' right to choose how such concerns might be responded to. Researchers made it clear that they had a duty to act on concerns but negotiated ways in which this was completed. Participants recalled examples of times when children were hurt or harmed, however all had been previously reported to child protection services or were historical in nature and children were deemed to no longer be at risk. In one instance, researchers sought permission from a family to advocate for them with the local child protection agency when it became obvious that psychological support was required for children in that family.

Consent, choice and control
All participants in the study were provided information about the project which included detail on what they were being asked to do, any risks or harms that might arise, the safeguards that were in place and the anticipated outcomes of the study. Participants were provided a consent form (Attachment 3) which articulated each of these research aspects and each participant was asked to indicate that they understood the risks, benefits, and nature of the interviews being conducted.

Parental co-consent was sought for young people who were aged under 18 when it was identified that seeking this consent would not cause the young person harm (see Mudaly & Goddard, 2009). This reflects findings from previous research which argues that seeking parental consent from an abusive parent is unethical if it leads to a child or young person being harmed when their parent becomes aware that they have been identified as a potential victim or agreed to be characterised as such (see Mudaly & Goddard, 2009).

In addition, the interviews were constructed in such a way that participants were given the opportunity to reaffirm their consent at different points, and to decide, at the end of the interview, if there were things that they had shared which they did not want included as data. This reflected the team's commitment to ensuring that participants had ownership of their stories and had the option to withdraw their consent at any time.

Participants were also reassured that they did not have to answer any question they didn't feel comfortable answering. They were given options to speak about their own lived experience but informed that if they preferred to speak less specifically this was appropriate.

Representation
Throughout the project we attempted to engage participants and to share their stories in ways that were empathetic and empowering. In writing this report, effort was taken to share participants' stories respectfully and to present participants as survivors of violence rather than as victims and to present their experiences without judgment.

A group of participants were given an opportunity to consider the way that the sample was represented, the language utilised and the findings presented. Our Aboriginal Leaders' Groups were also asked for guidance on how Aboriginal people were represented in the report.

Researcher Safety

The family and domestic violence and child protection literatures point to challenges often experienced by researchers conducting studies on sensitive issues (Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2018). Academics conducting research with families affected by violence need to be aware of and minimise the risks that they themselves might encounter violent family members or may be vicariously affected by the pain and distressing stories that they hear from participants (Nikischer, 2019). The research team had a number of strategies in place to manage these risks.

Firstly, as noted above, interviews were conducted in public but discreet locations where it was unlikely that interviewees and researchers would encounter family members. Secondly, researchers let other team members know when they were completing interviews and "checked in" and "checked out" before and after research activities so that others knew where they were and that they were safe. Thirdly, researchers would debrief with one another after interviews, where they were given the opportunity to reflect on conversations and their emotional responses to individual stories. Finally, informal and formal supervision was provided to researchers within their research centres or schools and at whole-of-team meetings.

Similar strategies were in place for research team members who were coding and analysing data and writing the research report in recognition that similar emotional impacts can be experienced (Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016).

3.2.2 Recruitment

Participants were recruited through non-government agencies working with children, young people, mothers, fathers and families who were exposed to family and domestic violence, including family support, specialist family violence, homelessness, family reunification and youth support programs. Aboriginal young people, mothers and fathers were also recruited through community-controlled organisations, Aboriginal men's youth and family support services and non-Aboriginal programs.

Consistent with previous research regarding family and domestic violence, recruitment for this study was challenging (Btoush & Campbell, 2009; Logan, Walker, Shannon, & Cole, 2008). For a family to participate they needed to be linked to a service that: could identify clients who had experienced FDV, separation, and reunification; provided ongoing support to a family; were supportive of the project; were able to invest time and effort contacting, informing and supporting the family's participation; and had organisational approval to do so.

This reflects guidance from the broader family and domestic violence research, and direction from our Advisory and Aboriginal Leaders Groups, that stresses the value of working in partnership with community organisations who can provide ongoing assistance to participants (Logan et al., 2008).

Mothers, fathers and young people (aged 15-25) were invited to participate in the study when:

- they had lived in families affected by family and domestic violence,
- had a period of separation due to statutory involvement (including child protection and corrections), and
- were currently receiving support from an organisation who committed to providing them ongoing assistance.

Mothers, fathers, and young people (aged 15-25) were excluded from the study if they:

- were currently living in unsafe environments,
- had experienced a recent traumatic life event, and/or
- felt that they were not emotionally equipped to talk about their experiences.

3.2.3 Participants

Thirty-eight parents and 12 young people aged 15-27 participated in a qualitative interview that took between 45 and 90 minutes to complete. Fourteen of the parents and one of the young people identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.

Table 1: Participant characteristics

	Females	**Males**	**Subtotal**
Parents	23	15	28
Young People			
Young People 5-18	2	4	6
Young People 19-25	5	0	5
Young People 25+	0	1	1
TOTALS:	30	20	50

3.4 Data analysis

The interviews generated large amounts of data about the experiences and views of young people, mothers, and fathers (Boyatzis, 1998; Ezzy, 2013). All interviews were transcribed, auto-coded, and a thematic analysis was completed utilising a qualitative data analysis program, NVivo. The data from each interview was examined in-depth and then compared with other sources of data. Transcripts were deductively coded against the broad research questions and themes were developed inductively in response to common experiences emerging from interviews (Boyatzis, 1998).

Members of the research team met on several occasions to confirm and clarify the qualitative coding framework and to refine the analysis process. Three members of the research team coded interviews and shared their coding to ensure that the themes emerging were consistent and that there was a level of inter-rater reliability.

Quotes in this report are used to illustrate the shared experiences of participants emerging through the research and analysis and provide examples of the themes explored. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and the need to protect participants' anonymity some minor details may have been modified to mask identities. Each quote includes a label to help the reader differentiate one participant from another.

A number of case studies have been included to provide more context and a more detailed account of families' experiences at different points in their time in the system. Case studies have been modified slightly or present two interwoven stories to ensure that they are not identifiable. Cases represent common scenarios that may be more representative of a broad range of experiences, rather than presenting extremes. However, the case studies are often distressing and highlight considerable challenges: within families; and within the systems with which they interact.

3.5 Limitations

The recruitment of young people for this study proved particularly challenging, in spite of significant efforts. This is not an uncommon experience in child protection, family and domestic violence, and 'sensitive' research (see: Murray & Smith, 2009; Powell et al., 2019), with researchers reporting numerous challenges: including hesitation of workers to recruit participants for potentially sensitive and triggering research; a lack of engagement of services with older young people from families experiencing violence; and an invisibility of young people experiencing family violence within mainstream youth services. Some organisations who were approached to assist recruitment into the study reported that they believed that young people in families affected by FDV were an over-researched group and were unwilling to participate in our study. Others identified that most of their clients were currently going through traumatic life events and that their involvement might be triggering, or that they were not aware of family violence issues experienced by their clients.

Despite these limitations, recruitment did yield a diverse group of parents and young people who provided rich data which could adequately answer the research questions posed.

The research team acknowledges that its recruitment strategy and inclusion and exclusion criteria led to only families known to and, in many cases, currently receiving support from a family and domestic violence, family support, youth or reunification service. As such, families who have had no engagement with services are under-represented. Despite attempts to recruit a broad sample, families from culturally and linguistically diverse, same-sex headed households and families including family members with a disability were under-represented.

Findings

A unique contribution made by this study is that participants were invited to share their life stories and include detail of their lives prior to and during periods of violence, separation, and reunification. This is unique as many studies have tended to focus primarily on periods of violence, separation, or reunification, so the full spectrum of the experience has not been understood. As will be demonstrated, most of the families in the study lived with significant structural barriers and challenges that influenced their experiences of violence, separation, and reunification and experienced compounding impacts that affected the ways that they interacted with the service system and managed their way along the reunification continuum.

In addition to the impacts of violence, many of the study's participants also characterised periods of separation as challenging and, in some cases, traumatising, with enduring impacts on family relationships, personal identity, and trust. Some young people whose experience of alternate care was problematic reported that they felt less safe when separated from their families than when they were experiencing violence. Mothers and young people asserted the need for families and the services that support them to understand, prepare for and overcome the personal and interfamilial impacts of separation to enable positive reunification and recovery.

4. FAMILY BACKGROUNDS AND EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE

In this first section of the findings, we provide an account of the families and their backgrounds before reporting on the nature, impact and needs of parents, families and young people prior to and during periods of violence.

4.1 Community Contexts

Before accounting for the challenges that families experience, we provide a brief overview of some of the challenges inherent in their communities that families believed had an influence on the violence and other difficulties they experienced. In some instances, these community-level factors were protective while in others they compounded challenges related to FDV.

Some parents spoke about particular neighbourhoods where they had lived where problematic drug use and violence were also significant and how these problems were almost normalised. This was a particular concern for many of the Aboriginal families who talked about being "caught up" in extended families and communities where there was violence and where violence was being normalised. They shared that they experienced difficulties such as alcohol and drug use and reported that it was often difficult to break cycles without work done to help communities resolve broader challenges. Participants also spoke about how it was not unusual for children from their communities to be removed, with some suggesting that it was often an expected outcome for families in their area.

Parents often identified adults (including extended family) who were good parents and role models but recounted that often they did not have peers around them to whom they could go for guidance or support:

It's the biggest known drug addict place ever… It's not a safe place for kids… Well, I can walk around, I'll walk past them, I don't care, but if they come near me, I don't feel safe… I don't know them, strangers. And they come up and they look at my kid and stuff like that… Like, honestly, I don't hit no one, unless someone tried to hit me first. But I don't want anything to happen while my kid's there, so I just shout at them, go away. (MOTHER, #M2O)

Everyone around us was doing the same stuff and getting their children taken and you kind of think "this is normal" or almost "like that's just what happens here" it's impossible to break through, you know (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M3)

In my home town, … it's rough as guts there, alcohol and drugs, and you name it, you know. Where once before, my old life, me and my partner and children, was living an atmosphere, was surrounded by drugs and alcohol, and domestic violence; you name it. A lot was happening, you know, domestic violence and stuff … We watched how alcohol and drugs, and everything destroyed our family… Where most of our people down there are just being destroyed with alcohol and drugs. They've got no hope, the departments do not help them. (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F4).

For family challenges to be resolved, participants felt that responses that helped communities (particularly Aboriginal communities) to deal with broader challenges, often stemming from colonisation and systemic racism, to be resolved. One family talked about feeling as though they needed to leave their hometown, their extended families and support networks and move to another location so that they could provide safety for their children and deal with their own challenges.

4.2 Family makeup

At the beginning of interviews with mothers, fathers, and young people, participants were invited to reflect on the nature of their families, the types of relationships that existed within families, and the challenges that they faced.

It is important to note that Aboriginal participants often had a wider and more extensive sense of family, often referring to their communities as being 'family' and referring to them with pride, support and identity. They highlighted the need for non-Aboriginal services and systems to acknowledge, understand and foster kinship networks (beyond the nuclear and even extended family) throughout the separation-reunification continuum as a source of support:

In Aboriginal family, your first cousin is your brother or sister boy, and so it's not until your second or third cousin that you call them cousins, they say oh, that's my brother or my sister, to the first cousins, because that's how they grew up, so close. (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F6)

Most participants identified the people who they considered 'family' and reflected on the nature of those relationships. During these participant conversations it became evident that a number of family forms existed in people's lives and that they may be part of various family formations.

- **Nuclear families** – most often parents began by referring to their children, some of whom were still living them but also children who were separated.

- **Blended families** – many of the families in the sample were those that had separated with mothers and fathers, re-partnering and then having children. As such, many of the families included half-siblings, stepchildren, stepmothers and stepfathers and partners. The nature and quality of these relationships was also often varied: in some families, stepparents had close relationships with their stepchildren while in others the relationships were strained.

- **Separated parents** – many of the parents and young people reported that they were estranged from parents and ex-partners due to separation and divorce. Some young people talked about shared-care arrangements while others spoke about estranged relationships with parents they were no longer living with. In a small number of situations, parents reported having amicable relationships with their former partners but rarely identified them as providing emotional or practical support across the reunification continuum. Similarly, young people often emphasised their biological parents as being important to them but were not always able to draw on these relationships during periods of challenge.

- **Separated siblings** – due to the rates of separation and divorce and the numbers of young people who were removed by child protection services or had left to live independently, many of the participating families reported that they had children or siblings who were not living with them. Often parents reported that this separation was painful and many of the young people spoke with some sadness about the fact that they did not co-habit. However, many of the families talked about efforts to sustain ongoing relationships while young people spoke about the support that they received from siblings, particularly during periods of difficulty.

- **Re-partnering** – in many of the families, parents separated due to family violence and parents re-partnered with new partners. In many of these instances, parents who used violence continued to assault their new partners and their partners' children, and mothers escaping violence partnered with men who subsequently also caused further harm to them and their children.

- **Extended families** – participants often referred to extended family members who provided them varying degrees of support during periods of violence, separation, and reunification. The capacity of family members to seek assistance from these family members was often limited (as discussed below), however many identified grandparents, aunts and uncles, half-siblings and, for young people, biological parents who they were not living with as individuals who had a positive influence in their lives:

    [Q: Who is family to you?] Yes, so I've got my dad and my step-mum as well, they're separated now though, and then they have two girls … I think, and then I've got obviously on Mum's side is two sisters as well and then my brother… we're Mum and Dad's, well, the rest of them are half-siblings… including a half-brother who is deceased. (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1)

    When it comes to my side of the family, I ran away from home when I was really young because my dad was quite violent. … my dad's seen as a good bloke, but I must've been a terror of a kid and he – I probably done something wrong every day that I was waiting to get a smack, you know, and so I remember running away from home when young. I've got, who I claim as my second dad, my uncle and aunties, they're no relationship to me but they brought me up. I ran away, I ran away from home really young… (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F6)

As will be discussed below, during periods of violence and separation, some families drew on the support of their extended families, however they also reported significant challenges in sustaining relationships. One young woman talked about how she relied on her biological grandmother when her parents were violent but that this support waned as a result of conflict between her parents and her grandparents, leaving her with little support. She reflected that having a good relationship with her grandmother underpinned her sense of safety and needed to be restored for her to be safe throughout periods of violence and separation:

[We had a good relationship with our Nan but when the violence occurred she] was appalled. She couldn't believe the way we were treated and she would call CPS, child protection, she would take us for weekends, make sure we were fed… We were there so often we had clothes there and stuff. It was like a second home… Since coming home [last year] we don't go there very often. We don't have clothes there anymore – that tells you we don't need her as much. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 15-18 #YW4)

Parents, usually mothers, described further challenges in sustaining important relationships due to the isolating nature of family violence, and the further isolation and shame associated with removal of children from their care:

I wasn't involved with [child protection services] when I was growing up, but my kids are, and that's so sad. From where I come from, my family history, so yes. It's like I'm a disappointment to our family because I've got their involved and taken my kids, so yes. I'm a disappointment to my family. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M15)

Case Study 1: James & Chantelle

James[3] is 35 and lives with his wife, Chantelle who is 29. James and Chantelle were raised in foster care, after being removed due to experiencing physical and sexual abuse in the home environment. James was subsequently physically and sexually assaulted by a foster carer and became homeless when he was 15. Similarly, Chantelle had had no stability with her placements, experiencing a dozen placements in ten years. She was exited from care when she was 16, after becoming pregnant with her older boyfriend's child. This child was removed at birth. Both James and Chantelle have struggled with the responsibility of parenting their children and have never had family or friends to rely on for help or guidance, or for positive experiences of parenting to draw from. Having lost his job, James recalls feeling like a failure as a parent and as a partner and began hurting his wife and children. At first this was mostly "yelling" and "smacking" but became more intense over time. He told researchers that he feels angry at himself for the times he assaulted Chantelle, particularly when his children were present. He believes that his shame kept him from seeking professional help to deal with his anger and to protect rather than hurt his family. Chantelle told researchers the threat of losing more of her children kept her from leaving James, who she hoped would change. She believed that separation would "destroy" James and jeopardise any hope that he could overcome his problems and be the parent and partner that she believed he could be.

4.3 Family Strengths

Families were asked to identify the strengths within their families and the relationships that they held with their children, parents, siblings, and extended family members. A number reported that it was unusual but important for them to be able to talk about these strengths, sharing that while in the service system much of the discussion about their families related to their challenges, their failings and their weaknesses rather than their assets. Two mothers and two fathers reported that at the time of the interview they couldn't identify any current family strengths, describing that family breakdown and conflict had taken its toll:

I would have said 12 months ago, trust, dedication, but that's obviously not applicable anymore [since our children have been removed]. So, I find that question very hard to answer. (NON-ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F5)

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[3] To protect participant's anonymity names and identifiable details have been changed. Cases may be an amalgam of two stories interwoven when participants' experiences are similar.

However, most participants identified family features of which they were proud:

I just think we're caring and loving and like to be there for each other and just enjoy life and, yeah. Yeah... We support each other, and we help each other get through things and we – if there is a situation or a problem, even if it's over a dolly that's head's just fallen off, we sit there at the time and we speak about our feelings and we move forward, and we go on. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M2)

Parents often identified things about their children that they loved and brought them pride. At the same time, young people often identified things about parents who did not use violence that they respected and appreciated:

I don't know, it's hard to explain because they're my everything... if I didn't have my kids, I'll know for a fact I'd be under the ground.... I'm that kind of person that the only thing that keeps me going is my kids. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M9)

My oldest son, he's caring, he's polite, he knows his manners, but he still likes to run amok. But my middle son..., whoa, he's not my kid. I tell him, "You're too nice to be my kid." (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F2)

For Aboriginal participants, family offered an invaluable source of cultural connections, cultural pride, a sense of identity, and being part of a broader community. Aboriginal parents reported their commitment to instilling these strengths for their own children:

And they know [me when] they get off the train, "Yes, that's sis, she comes to see her kids. She's doing the right thing." They're talking about me when I walk past, they are acknowledging who I am and what am I doing [there]..., especially that little suburb. I want him to be proud to be Aboriginal. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #12)

For other families, extended family was also seen as a great asset, providing support, particularly during difficult times, helping put their challenges into perspective and providing financial and emotional support during times of conflict:

My sister's just my rock, we just talk about everything in general, you have a bad hair day and you're on the phone. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M2)

Families who had survived through periods of violence, separation and adversity spoke about their resilience and were proud that they had not "given up" on their children or families. This will be discussed further in Section 7.

4.4 Diverse experiences of adversity

The dynamics and composition of families varied greatly as did the type of challenges that they experienced. However, all families had and were often still experiencing forms of adversity that coalesced around family and domestic violence, compounded impacts, and affected the ways that families were supported.

These are included in Figure 3 which identifies exposure to past challenges (in orange), ongoing family issues (blue), and community-level risks:

Figure 3 Family Challenges

Figure 3 Family Challenges

- **Past traumatic events:** many of the parents reported having had childhoods characterised by family and domestic violence, family separations, child abuse, and ongoing trauma. They reported feeling let down by their families and the systems that were supposed to have protected and supported them:

  And see, I only realised that myself when, because I was actually sexually abused as a child. And I went to a counsellor and my dad, 'cause my mum didn't believe me through any of it. So there's been a lot of violence and DV stuff through my whole life. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M7)

  It was a 'three-peat' [a trifecta]: My parents abandoned me, my grandparents abandoned me and [child protection services] abandoned me. (NON-ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F13)

- **Intergenerational parenting** concerns: related to past trauma, several mothers and fathers reported not having positive experiences of being parented during their own childhoods. They reported having absent, neglectful or abusive parents, and argued that this restricted their capacity to be a good parent, rarely having good role models to draw upon when raising their own children:

  [Child protection removed me from the house when [my mother and] my sister were on drugs, and my mum was on drugs (ABORIGINAL MOTHER. #M2O)

  And another reason why these things happen is because - look at my past. Why wouldn't I have problems being a dad, you know? I don't know how – and I will be the first one to be honest; I don't have a clue. I'm still quite young and I'm not even ready yet but at the same time she's not an accident but me doing it was an accident because I don't really love her mum so – yes. (NON-ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F13)

- **Intergenerational violence**: was experienced by many parents and young people in the study. Both mothers and fathers reported experiencing family violence as children and 4 young people reported having experienced violence during their childhoods and within their adult relationships with partners. As will be discussed further, young women in particular reported that family violence had been normalised from a young age, which meant that they were ill-equipped to identify abusive behaviours of adult male partners or to seek out assistance during adulthood:

  Yeah, and growing up my dad was an alcoholic so there was always violence in our home as well. He would start off as a happy drunk and then go angry drunk. Not that he got mum and beat the shit out of her but pushed her over or whatever, still violence. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M1)

  - **Parents' experiences of separation during childhood**: a number of the parents reported that they had been removed from their own parents during childhoods for extended periods of time, with 6 being raised by other family members or within the formal care system. For example, these two fathers explain very different circumstances and times when they were in out of home care:

    I got sort of taken off [my parents] in a way. Apparently [my Dad] was violent with my mum — my real dad this is, with my real mum. He went violent; she was getting abused by him. Apparently I was getting abused by, I think, maybe both of them. I was grotty and I wasn't clean, I wasn't getting fed much. (NON-ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F13)

    I mean, I myself was in care from 13 to 18. And when I got taken into care, no one wants to adopt a 13-year-old kid. They want babies and young kids, people they can bring up, getting called mum and dad, kind of thing. So, I know what I went through being in care and how hard it is to get help and support when you can voice what help and support you need. (NON-ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F14)

- **Past relationship instability and breakdown**: many of the parents in the sample had had multiple partners prior to and after experiencing family and domestic violence, of whom many were also violent. For some mothers, this led to a sense that they were un-loveable and an expectation that relationships were inevitably problematic. Young people reported that with low expectations, mothers often lived with abusive partners believing that they "would never do any better" and were unlikely to separate due to a lack of self-esteem and sense of self-worth, which are often the effects of DFV on victimised women:

  I went through two, well three DV relationships, one when I've lost the children, then another one, that was like my eldest son when they were born, that's when I lost my children, got them back, then I got in a relationship for seven years and had three children to this one, but he was domestic, there was a lot of police/family protection unit involved, but not [Child Protection] (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M10)

- **Grief and loss**: A large number of families in this study had been affected by the death of a parent or partner and spoke about enduring grief and loss. Other parents talked about the grief they experienced when their other children had been removed or had cut ties with the family due to family and domestic violence or other family breakdown.

- **Mental health issues:** were cited as a challenge for many of the families in this study. A parent's mental illness and the challenges it posed for them were believed to influence their violence, the impacts of violence, their ability to parent and protect their children, and the ways they interacted with formal and informal supports, services and systems.

- **Alcohol and other drug issues**: Seventeen participants mentioned in interviews that there was problematic AOD use in their families and this had pervasive effects on relationships, interactions, family stability, and parental capacity.

- **Crime:** Six of the parents in the study reported that they or their partner had committed crimes (in addition to FDV) including assaults and drug dealing. In these families, separation occurred due to a parent's incarceration, however crime was prevalent in other families also:

    I, sort of, just went off [the rails] when my dad passed away, I think about five or six years ago, and I started dealing. And then because the dealing, and wheeling and dealing, I started mixing with stupid people. I started cheating on [my partner] and that's got – after about four years or something, she's clicked on, and then things just went pear shaped from there. I got out of jail, confessed, and then just felt really, really bad. (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F10)

- **Social exclusion**: many of the families spoke about being isolated and disconnected to formal and informal support networks and this was compounded when an abusive parent or partner used intimidation to maintain their isolation:

    I know that has happened in my situation with my family I was threatened like don't tell anyone and then there are threats along with that sometimes… [You also don't want other people to judge you:] Well, from personal experience, it is because you don't want people to find out and you have to really be careful to trust the right people, even though everyone is trying to help, if they did say something, you still don't want that to happen, at least in my experience. So, that's why trusting can be difficult. (YOUNG WOMAN, AGED 19-25 #5)

- **Poverty**: was seen as a significant challenge for most of the families, who reported that it led to great stress, influenced their ability to seek help, and compounded the impacts of other family challenges:

    Food helps lift the quality, all the time. Food is always the first thing, all right. I do see a lot of domestic violence when I'm walking to a house and there's no food in the cupboards, no food in the fridge and there's kids that are hungry, right, and they're going "Mum, I'm hungry, dad, I'm hungry, and you've got all this happening and it ends up the two people turn on each other, all right. It's your fault I can't feed the kids", "No, it's your fault I can't, and then the clash happens. I see that so often. So, food is a big part of starting somebody's day (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F6)

Often these challenges coalesced around family and domestic violence, sometimes gradually, sometimes as families spiralled into periods of great difficulty:

I had a husband, like kids in a private school, healthcare, everything, all these amazing wonderful things apparently, and then, um, my marriage fell apart and I turned to ice and from that my whole, yeah, life, everything, yeah, I mean if you ask me, um, well, seven years' ago, what my life would be like now, there's no way. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M11)

There was some variety in the ways that parents and young people considered these adverse family experiences: some believed that these unresolved issues explained the violence, others reported that they existed alongside and compounded the impacts of violence (i.e. families that had poor links with family often became more isolated during periods of violence), while almost all believed that the above challenges had a pervasive impact on the family and individuals during periods of separation and attempted reunification. Men who used violence, in particular, pointed to the above challenges as 'causing' their violence, sometimes distancing themselves from responsibility for hurting their partners and children and using their own experiences of harm as the rationale for their behaviours:

This was back when the DV stuff was really big in Parliament, so you were guilty and had to prove yourself innocent…. She placed me under restraining order with – along with her. Because she claimed that the children were at threat as well. But I never hurt the children or her at all. (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F2)

As will be discussed in greater detail below, families reported that some of these challenges, outlined in Figure 3, were used as a rationale for statutory child protection-directed separation and made it difficult for parents as they sought for their children to be returned. For many mothers, these challenges made it difficult for them to remain separated from partners or to leave subsequent relationships in the face of financial stability and unresolved grief and loss; these factors therefore diminished women's capacities to make changes that would enable them to reclaim their children.

Participants stressed the need for services and systems working with families to recognise that FDV rarely exists in isolation and that efforts to prevent or respond to violence must be complemented by adequate supports, resources and therapies that reduce, ameliorate or minimise the impacts of the other challenges commonly faced by families such as those who participated in this study.

4.5 Nature of family violence

While there was some variation in who, how, and when family members used violence, overwhelmingly, violence was used by male adults. This most often involved mothers' new partners, fathers and, in a small number of families, both mothers and fathers/male partners. Although this study did not recruit families where the sole user of violence was a child or young person, it was reported that some siblings and children used violence; however, this sat in the context of a parent or caregiver also engaging in violent behaviour.

For the families in the study, violence was unpredictable with the threat characterised as constant and debilitating. During periods of violence, mothers spoke about being hyper-vigilant and focussing their attention on imminent threats rather than on the long-term needs of their children and families. As one mother put it, "you have to focus on the here and now, you can't see that far in front of you, it's just about surviving".

Echoing the findings of previous studies, the violence used by family members (mostly males) against other adult family members (mostly mothers) included:

- **Physical assault**: where participants were physically attacked, and which ranged in severity from being slapped and restrained:

    He nearly killed me, just beat me every day… And then after that, [there were] a lot more violent acts… My son was actually beaten. I don't actually know his nose was broken, but it was a bit crooked, but I did take him to a doctor. And my youngest at the time had cigarette burns on him (ABORIGINAL MOTHER. #M2O).

    I was pushing her around and I choked her and I slapped her and stuff, and then it ended up getting pretty violent. And then I've headbutted her, and that's when my daughter come running out. She must've been listening to it as well, but I thought she was in her room. I didn't really think. She's not in front of it, she's not hearing any of it or anything, but she obviously would've been. And then she ran out and said, "No, Daddy, stop." And that's when I finally — after I headbutted my partner, I pretty much snapped out of it. (NON-ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F4)

- **Emotional violence and abuse**: where family members were bullied and threatened, intimidated and feared for their and other family members' safety:

    … when he used to do it to me, he used to say, "You're just a verbal waste of space and you shouldn't be on earth." (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M13)

- **Coercive control and social exclusion**: where family members were isolated and disconnected from family, friends and their broader communities as a form of control:

He would check my phone messages. He would know who I'd text message and talk. He would check my computer. So there was no hiding whatsoever. ,(NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M4)

He was violent, so controlling, I wasn't allowed to talk to nobody, none of his brothers or anything. If I did I would get bashed, I would get a hiding. Always used to walk with my head down, not look up even on the streets. He cut me off from my mum, my dad, and have them in my life, none of my brothers or sisters. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M15)

- **Using children or excluding mothers from children as a form of manipulation**: where some fathers recognised the anguish that mothers and children experienced when separated and used this to enact power and control:

  And it just went from worse to worse, and it got to the point that he was actually really physical and horrible, and he tied me up in a shed after he'd bashed me and then sat all my kids outside the shed and told them not to open the shed door. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M7)

- **Poly-victimisation:** where spouses were assaulted in a variety of ways. Amongst the sample physical violence was rarely experienced in isolation:

  [My son's] father got a past history with his first partner, first wife and in that relationship, it resulted in their third child's death... He was violent, so controlling, I wasn't allowed to talk to nobody, none of his brothers or anything. If I did I would get bashed, I would get a hiding. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M15)

4.5.1 Young people's experience of violence

Young people were mostly both witnesses to, and direct victims of, violence within their families. Most commonly, the violence by their mothers' partners and, to a lesser extent, their fathers, was directed towards them and their siblings. Young people reported direct harm and noted that their siblings also often witnessed the violence.

The types of violence that young people directly experienced included:

- **Physical abuse**: where children were physically assaulted, including punishments that caused injury or would not otherwise be considered appropriate:

  Dad usually fought with Mum, it wasn't at us most of the time. Dad once pinned [my brother] up against the wall and it went to court and everything but it was mostly at my Mum. And Mum would throw punches too. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 15-18 #YW4)

  [My mother's boyfriends assaulted my brother and I]. A lot of physical, so being kicked, hit, belted, used weapons against us, like, all sorts of very volatile things that I would never imagine doing to my own children so, yeah. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25, #YW7)

- **Emotional abuse:** where children were threatened, intimidated or experienced emotional distress:

  Definitely [the violence was directed] mainly [at] my mum. But I guess, my dad sort of did other stuff, like, it wasn't necessarily violence, but it was more sort of like verbal, like, mental, or like just intimidation. I was never actually hurt, but just – yeah. (YOUNG WOMAN aged 15-18 #YW1)

  We were constantly told ""You're an idiot, you're worthless," all the typical things to make you feel like you don't matter. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25, #YW7)

- **Neglect and deprivation:** where parents did not provide children with necessities or withheld these as a way of controlling them:

    Yes. Because I don't contribute to the household, so I don't deserve to eat or some bullshit. I would store up like tinned stuff in my room, so that I could eat that … I didn't bother mentioning it to the counsellors or whatever because the details of it or whatever didn't seem important to me because it was just normal… My brother and my sister get food, they get plenty of food, they get lunch, they get breakfast, they get dinner. Admittedly, it's pretty shitty dinner but they get it. (YOUNG MAN, aged 15-18 #YM5)

- **Sexual abuse:** where children and young people were sexually assaulted by their mother's male partner:

    During some of the times that the kids have said that this other particular person perpetrated certain things to them, I was in the house… There was sexual, physical, mental. So there was three things. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M4)

- **Poly-victimisation**: where young people experienced various forms of abuse and exposure to violence:

    Yeah, yeah, and the violence had started in there, mild violence with my sisters' dad smacking me and pushing me around and dragging me around, I remember being dragged a lot… yeah, yeah, and locked in rooms, always locked in rooms, I can't lock doors in my house [now because of that] … I copped most of my violence from my mum, my mum was the one that used weapons against us… like, usually belts, wooden spoons, spatulas, metal spatulas not plastic spatulas (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25, #YW7)

4.5.2 Users and victims of violence

As noted, violence was mostly perpetrated by males; either male partners of mothers or biological fathers. However, four young people reported that their mother physically or emotionally abused them, and as the following quote highlights, this occurred within the context of the mother also being victimised:

    [My mother] she would cop it and then she would perpetrate as well…. to myself and my brother, my big brother. [Q: And to her partners?] No, she was submissive to them and perpetrators to us so, yeah. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25, #YW7)

Two mothers reported that their partners' anger was primarily focused on their children, who the partners believed were the cause of the families' problems. These mothers attempted to protect and shield their children, yet the children were still harmed:

    And it took me a long time to realise that he didn't actually want to hurt me, he wanted to hurt the baby… Yeah. It's taken me all this time to actually see it. He thinks that things between me and him are perfect and the baby has come between it…There was an incident when [my child] was seven weeks old where, well, this is when I learnt that he wanted to hurt my child and not me – he'd started an argument with me and I'd taken [my child] from the bedroom into his bedroom, placed him in his bassinet, pushed his bassinet up against the wall because I thought that he was going to come in and go for me. But instead of going for me he bee-lined it straight for the baby and shook the crap out of my bassinet. And I instinctively, I guess, laid on top of my baby and tried to stop him from shaking. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M21)

In some families, there were periods when it was only children and young people who were harmed – either by a father or their mother's male partner or, in a small number of cases, by a mother. In other families, mothers (and in two cases, fathers) were primarily the target. It

appeared that, in most cases, with the exception of the examples above, younger children were less likely to be the direct victims of violence, which gradually changed as they grew into adolescence. In some instances, young people actively provoked a violent parent so that they, rather than their mother or siblings, would be the victims of assault:

> *But I have had to use, like, step in between them two, I've kind of gotten a little bit hurt in the process… because sometimes it has sort of gone to that point where something bad could happen, and I would rather have been hurt instead of someone hurting themselves or someone hurting another person. (YOUNG WOMAN aged 15-18 #YW1)*

This strategy was also used by some mothers, who provoked an incident so that their children were not the victims of their partners' violence.

> *Well, it wasn't until I went to prison and I did that actual Domestic Violence Group… that I saw the cycle of violence, and I was like, wow. I actually used to piss him off on purpose while all the kids were at school, so that he would flog me while the kids were at school. That way I thought that I was protecting them, but, of course, they came home and saw the aftermath and yeah. There were always marks and bruises and yeah. I thought I was doing the right thing, but then it would give me three days grace. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M18)*

Young people often reported that their older siblings had been victims of their parents' violence and that their own victimisation increased when these siblings left home. As will be discussed further, violence continued, despite separation. The violence often took a different form and escalated; moving from physical assault to harassment, intimidation and emotional manipulation:

> *He'd, like, post on social media that I'm a dog and I'm this and I'm that and he'd just like and he'd belittle me and it's like – he's done it this time around. Out for fucking – out [of prison] for less than a week and he rings me constantly, rings my friend constantly, harasses us. The abuse is just nuts this time. This is the second time and I said, "Don't ring me, I'll ring the police, I don't give a fuck, I'll report you this time around, I'm done with you." I got to the point like a month ago where he was just that bad. I was hanging myself and fucking lock him out of his own house, I didn't care at all, and neither did he and he said, "Maybe it's best off that way because no-one's going to miss you. You don't deserve your son, your son doesn't fucking - he deserves someone better than you," he said, "you've got no friends, blah, blah, blah," and he's like, "I fucken hate you." (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M8)*

4.5.3 Impact of family and domestic violence

Across the sample, parents and young people directly affected by FDV identified a number of short and longer-term impacts that took their toll during periods of separation and reunification.

While some mothers spoke of attempting to shield their children, many reflected on the toll of living with violence. One mother noted that her responses to violence also vicariously impacted her children both physically and emotionally:

> *So every time that I felt wary or cautious or whatever [my son] would have felt also and since he was such a small baby, well, his whole life, really, he's been through this. So, yeah, I imagine he would have felt the tension a lot too. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M21)*

Other mothers who had escaped family violence and were now able to reflect on their experiences also accounted for some of the impacts of being exposed to violence, even when their children had not been direct victims or witnessed the violence:

> *Just because they're not seeing it, that's still not okay, they can hear it, they can feel it. So, they deal with you afterwards, they deal with always on edge, walking on egg shells, I know that, I understand that, I didn't at the time. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M10)*

Feelings of guilt, shame and being a failure as a parent

Most fathers minimised their use of violence and the subsequent impacts. However, a few fathers whose children had witnessed or directly experienced violence, reported significant guilt and shame, believing that they were a failure as a parent and partner for harming their wives and children.

> *I just hate being told you're doing a great job sort of thing, 'cause … in the back of my mind I still have this guilt that I should have done something a long time ago, but, I'm doing something now and that's what I focus on like, well, you can't change your past but you can change today the future, but, just, I suppose when the times get full on I sort of go back and that's when I just think I wish I did something earlier (NON-ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F7)*

Physical impacts

Across the sample, mothers and young people spoke about the physical injuries that they sustained as a result of their exposure to family violence. Many spoke about bruises, broken bones and fractures, and injuries to the head and internal organs. In some circumstances parents were not able to access medical support for themselves or their children as they were fearful of the repercussions from partners or service delivery systems. These injuries sometimes had long-term consequences with participants experiencing neurological issues, problems with organ functioning and ongoing pain.

> *[I] broke my leg last year. That hurt. I've got a brain tumour as well. It's like right here. It's probably due to trauma, but I can't really prove it. I've been hit so many times in the head. So, I don't know. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M3)*

> *The violence became quite severe, it started off as anger and yelling to flipping the furniture to - I was hit and I wanted to leave and I had my hand squeezed so hard that it broke my fingers and I had to have plastic surgery. Yeah. Whilst I was pregnant. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M4)*

Emotional impacts and a sense of hopelessness

Many of the mothers, and young people in the sample experienced emotional abuse and described being teased, belittled, and threatened. This emotional abuse, fear and harm took its toll with reports of "switching off" emotionally, self-harming and suicide attempts, anxiety and depression.

> *I was so, like, cutting myself. We're not, like, big people that just cut themselves real bad. Like, I did the tiny ones, but this one was in the middle. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER. #M2O)*

> *Obviously, I guess it can make you sad and in some circumstances, sometime full of anger, sadness and anger, all those things. Being scared is a big one. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25 #5)*

> *Like, I was, like, sort of like depressed, and very like sad, and like self-harm was around those sort of areas as well. And like, not wanting to be here, like, those sort of things, because of what was going on in my family. (YOUNG WOMAN aged 15-18 #YW1)*

The following two quotes describe the overwhelming feelings of a young man who was both the victim of assault and witnessed the abuse of his family members. This participant described feeling hopeless and significant fear for his mother and siblings:

I remember many a nights that we slept in the car because we didn't [have] anywhere else to go and so you go to school the next day and not have showered and with glass in your hair and you just wanted to die, you just did not want to be there so (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1)

I can probably honestly hand on heart say that I probably would have tried suicide myself if I wasn't so concerned about what would happen to the rest of the family, what would happen to the kids because I was constantly panicked that what if one day he just hit Mum too hard and she died and those kids are stuck in that environment for the rest of their life, because there's no help for kids, there was nothing so they were never going to get out... (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1)

Three of the young people also spoke about how their experiences of violence affected their psychological wellbeing and that they found themselves alarmed by loud noises which caused them stress and anxiety and led them into "panic mode". These "flight responses" continued long after periods of violence and affected their schooling, work, and day-to-day lives. Siblings were also reported to have a 'fight response', involving fighting with others and demonstrating aggression.

Mothers and young people reported being "on edge" over the longer term, noting the experience "*kind of goes away a little bit, but not fully[4]*". Many of the parents reflected that their children had difficulties handling emotions, which in some cases led to problems at home, school and in socialising with peers.

Secrecy

Many of the families reported a need to be secretive and that this was often instigated by abusive family members who threatened repercussions, reinforced by feelings of shame and guilt of family members and fears of family separation and child removal.

A lack of trust in others

Mothers and young people who experienced violence reported that they often found it difficult to trust others and to form relationships (both during the abusive relationship and afterwards). Young people reported some difficulties in forging relationships with partners, in seeking and accepting support from workers and informal peer networks and in developing friendships.

The normalisation of violence

Across the sample, many families reported intergenerational and sustained exposure to violence. Some fathers reported that this led them to believe that violence was normal and that conflict was a typical feature in relationships, a belief they used to justify their own use of violence. Similarly, women raised in families where violence was used or who had multiple violent partners reported that violence was typical and normalised, leading to a belief that it was inevitable. This led some to hesitate in leaving a violent partner, believing that 'good men' did not exist – or at least would not be attracted to them. This also points to a common belief that it is important for women to be in a relationship, even a bad relationship, rather than no relationship. Young women sometimes held similar views and reported that they partnered with abusive boyfriends.

Isolation

Many of those who experienced FDV were socially isolated from peers, family and their communities during periods of violence. Often this was instigated by parents (fathers and a mother) who used violence as a form of manipulation and intimidation but also as families experienced shame and guilt and self-isolated:

We lived a very transient lifestyle because the neighbours would start to know what was going on. So, he'd be, like, "We're moving house again." So, yeah. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M18)

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[4] YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25 #YW3

As noted above, extended families sometimes created distance with families experiencing FDV. This was for a number of reasons. Firstly, some extended family members were frustrated as they focussed on the women not leaving the relationship and placing the children at risk, instead of focusing on the male's use of violence. Secondly, participants reported that family violence is an uncomfortable topic for many who prefer to ignore and distance themselves from the violence. Finally, young people reported that when relationships between their parents and extended families broke down so did their own relationships and they found themselves feeling rejected or no longer able to access the supports these family members provided.

Relationships within families

Parents and young people reported that during periods of violence the relationships within families changed significantly.

Parents, usually mothers, often reported that their capacity to care for their child and meet their needs was restricted during periods of violence:

> Because the thing is, while you're going through DV you're protecting yourself, you're protecting your children, but - and I tell everybody, I left my children behind. Like, I didn't have time to do the whole mum discipline, play, discipline, play thing with them, because I was too busy protecting them. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M7)

They also recounted that despite attempts to protect them, their children were often direct victims and experienced significant harm. Mothers, in particular, reported that this caused them great stress and affected their identities as protective parents. These feelings of guilt and shame were prolonged during periods of separation.

In some instances, mothers recognised that they prioritised their relationships with their partners over the needs of their children. Sometimes this was because they believed that if they placated their partners, their children would be protected or because they believed that the children having a violent father was better than not having a father. Sometimes they were also not in a position to look out for their children or prioritise their needs, and this had a great impact on young people who felt disappointed by their parents' decisions:

> Because that's the hardest thing, is having your mum, your own mother against you, not supporting you, her own flesh and blood. So that was definitely a hard one. I don't know. I think that's really it, just really wanting to have my mum on my side. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25 #YW1)

Fathers who played a protective role did not report such challenges, believing that they protected their children from their partners when they were present. However, they did report some concern about the safety of their children when they were unable to be present or when children were placed into care.

Young people often displayed loyalty towards their mothers and distanced themselves from those who were disparaging or judgmental about them. This caused rifts in some families when mothers were blamed for the violence or for not protecting their children. This conflict often continued for many years, spanning periods of violence, separation and reunification. One young man recalls that when his stepfather assaulted him and his mother, he decided not to tell his biological father because his parents had separated badly and he wanted to protect his mother from judgement. Ultimately, the young man's father became aware of the violence and did blame his ex-wife, thereby damaging the relationship between father and son:

I had so many fights with my dad, so many fights with him over it over 16, 17, 18 and we went through a really rocky, rocky phase, I didn't speak to him probably from 18 to 20 because I was just, like, "Dad, shut the fuck up, you don't know what you're talking about, you weren't there, if you were interested in my welfare that's fine, that means being a parent, sitting down and being silent while someone who actually went through something traumatic explains to you what it fucking means. If you don't have the time for that then I don't have the time for you, as simple as that, if you're not going to help you're part of the problem and right now I don't need that negativity." (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1+)

Many young people reported feeling afraid, angry and let down by their parents, while others spoke positively of their relationships. These young people were torn between wanting to sustain relationships with their parents but also wanting and needing them to stop their violence.

In some families, parents who used violence also attempted to disrupt the relationships in the family. These parents, usually fathers or male partners, belittled the women in front of their children and blamed the mothers for the violence. Young people who were in late adolescence or early adulthood were able to see this for what it was, however they reported that as children, this was confusing and led some to develop negative opinions of their mothers.

Relationships with siblings were sometimes strengthened when children "stuck together", and older siblings took on additional caring responsibilities, helping siblings to cope with the challenges they faced. However, some relationships were strained with young people who had left home independently reporting that their siblings who remained at home felt resentment about being abandoned and 'let-down'.

Caring responsibilities

Although young people often recalled ways that parents (usually mothers) attempted to protect them from violence, they recognised that they were still often harmed. They were reluctant to blame their mothers (and in two cases, their fathers) but often were resigned to the fact that they had to carry the burden of responsibility for protecting themselves, their mothers and siblings:

Personally I didn't stay safe, I kept the younger ones safe, so I bore the brunt of the aggression so that they didn't cop it, because I didn't want them to have to go through what I went through, and I found out that I did a really good job of that because my sisters had no idea, I found out when they visited me not that long ago that they actually had no idea about everything that happened... When their fathers, because it was their fathers that were the perpetrators, when their fathers were in a mood, drinking, drugs, I would tell them to go play quietly, "don't come out, stay away", and my big brother and I would wear the aggression and the brunt of the moods that would come along. So my brother was trying to protect my mum and I was trying to protect my brother and the younger ones (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25 #YW7)

Most young people talked about the importance of this task and others said it was a responsibly they did not wish for. This heightened sense of responsibility increased when parents were also using alcohol or other drugs as children took care of their siblings and monitoring their parent's use. Young people reported that these caring responsibilities took their toll:

We look out for each other. We always have. I didn't know how much I was doing until I left … and when I found out all the things [my little brother] was doing cos now I was gone he had to do it all. Or it didn't get done… [When I left my brothers] had to look after themselves so they had to grow up. We all did. We weren't ever kids. Well we still had kid problems but we had adult problems too. We had all the problems from our parents so we had to grow up to deal with them and we left the kid problems behind..... I had to deal with that before I dealt with my own stuff… Before I moved out I was the adult, I was the parent of both my mum and my father (YOUNG WOMAN, AGED 15-18 #YW4)

When I was living with Dad I felt so responsible for [my sister] and like, I don't know, I think it would have been really handy if someone had have stepped in and been like, "Hey, this isn't the way it's supposed to be." (YOUNG MAN, aged 15-18 #YM5)

Education

The majority of young people reported that violence and adversity negatively affected their education through poor concentration, an inability to complete homework and make good progress at school. Parents mirrored this by discussing the above and the impact of frequent moving and its impact on their children's stability:

I didn't do good at school because I was dealing with the shit that was going on at home. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 15-18 #YW4)

Although participants did not always make a direct link between their family's circumstances and poor educational outcomes, parents and young people spoke about children demonstrating problematic behaviours at school, getting into fights, being bullied and having few friends. Many of the young people talked about how they and their siblings had dropped out of school early.

In contrast, some young people spoke of using school as a safe haven where they worked hard so that they did not cause additional stress in their families and were able to forget the problems they were facing. One young man talked about 'throwing himself' into extra-curricular activities to give himself permission to be away from home and the threats to his safety:

I pretty much tried to do every single hobby or extracurricular thing that I could think of that meant I didn't have to be at home and so I did martial arts which was a paid for program but then I joined the acting club at school, I did – I joined the literary club or the literacy club I should say, anything that was – because I didn't obviously – because Mum didn't have millions of dollars to spend on every single activity outside of school but I would go to absolutely every single one of them that I could because it meant that I wasn't at home and that was safe because I was far away. (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1+ 27)

Resilience and strength through adversity

Although families were negatively affected by their experiences of violence, many spoke about how they had grown and developed through difficult times: as individuals and a family. Young people, for example, talked about how they had become more focused and more determined and that they could overcome other challenges. Mothers spoke of finding the strength to make difficult decisions (including leaving their partners) and a greater determination to ensure that their children's needs were met:

I occupied myself very heavily and now I'm reaping the rewards of it because I'm multi-talented and I'm engaged with a lot of different stuff and I've developed a lot of talents and skillsets but it's also as a direct result of a really shitty circumstance. (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1+)

Escalation of violence

In a number of families, participants reported that violent episodes occurred after parents had disagreements that escalated to physical altercations. Although the young people did not hold their mothers solely responsible for the violence, some nonetheless believed that their mothers had initiated conflicts that turned violent. This reflects a form of mother-blaming in which the mother is seen as provoking the violence while her partner presumed to be unable to control his reaction.

> *So, because my mum sort of tends to really push buttons, and then my dad doesn't know when to stop. (YOUNG WOMAN aged 15-18 #YW1)*

In other families, violence began after a significant life event with some women reporting that they were first assaulted when they became pregnant, when a child grew into adolescence or after a male partner lost a job:

> *Things sort of escalated higher from there – one, I'd fallen pregnant again. It was just one of those, I don't actually know. Like, it was one of those control things that, you know, now you've got another baby to me you have to stay here, and you've got to stay put… so then he was either asleep during the day, if the babies cried, they were yelled at, they were screamed at, I was told, "Shut that baby up." It was, like, yeah, wow. And it's one of those things where you just go, yeah, okay, no worries, and get on with life. But I couldn't actually see the bigger picture of what was going on. I just thought this is how it's meant to be and whatnot. It got to the point where he would slash my car tyres so that I'd have to walk [my daughter] to school or I'd have to walk to do the shopping and it's like, okay, no worries. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M7)*

> *My mum tends to fall in love with the wrong men, so [my sister's] dad… he was lovely before the girls came along, I remember going to his house, I was maybe two or three going to his house and he'd give us lollies and take us to see fireworks and it was all fun and exciting and only good memories, and then the girls came along and that's when we he got worse and worse and worse, so it got bad after [the older girl] was born and then it got worse again after [the second] was born, and then by the time [the third] was born it was just full violence, hitting me and my brother with belts, wooden spoons, spatulas. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 21-25 #7)*

Participants were not always able to articulate the reasons for this escalation, with some recalling that their families had experienced other challenges in the past which did not trigger violence or aggression.

Fathers who used violence sometimes spoke about things progressively becoming more stressful, coupled with feelings that they were failing as a parent or partner and that violence was a way of controlling a situation – however, they too could not explain why past challenges had not led to similar incidents.

4.5.4 Difference in experiences and accounts of violence

It was evident through interviews, particularly when multiple family members participated in the study, that the experience and impact of violence varied for each person. In particular, children in the same families sometimes offered different accounts from each other and pointed out how their siblings' reactions were different to their own. In some circumstances, young people reported that their younger siblings appeared to be relatively unaware of the violence in their families and were not as fearful for their and their family's safety. Some young people reported that older siblings were more or less able to cope; that they were more or less inclined to "fight back" or to take responsibilities within the family:

[My brother] and I we are chalk and cheese, he's happy to just live in his bubble and play video games and that's okay, that was more than all right. Whereas me I was a bookworm, … I was a really inquisitive child [and].. I don't really accept things at face value now, I even get into disagreements with my bosses, "You have to do this." "No, not until you tell me why," which sometimes can be bad but that sort of mentality also wasn't nurtured, it was constantly put down and so that I would say also exacerbated my desire to fight back regardless of obviously the physical and the emotional abuse that Mum and I were getting but also because I didn't like bullies and that's just how I still am, grade school level but he was a bully. (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1)

Within the sample there were five families where both a parent (or two parents) and a child were each interviewed separately. Within these families, parents' accounts also commonly differed from each other and from their children's. In particular, parents apportioned responsibility differently: fathers sometimes suggested that violence was infrequent and was the result of provocation by their female partners whereas mothers and young people rarely did so. Similarly, mothers and fathers' accounts of how violence influenced their children's lives were understated in comparison to young people's own accounts. Young people posited that parents often felt guilty about their behaviours and the harm children experienced or witnessed, and that children often tried to hide their feelings from parents to avoid their parents' further shame and guilt. Three of the mothers conceded that during periods of violence and difficulty, their focus was on their own needs rather than on the experience or needs of their children:

The unpredictability of everything. It's just scary. It's just minute-by-minute really… [You] can't do any planning at all. The domestic violence I experienced was emotional, physical, financial. He ticked all the boxes. Yeah. It's just moment-by-moment… You are just trying to keep yourself safe and sometimes it's hard to keep focused on the kids. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M21)

4.6 Safety needs during periods of violence

Participants attested that individuals and families rarely felt safe when violence was present. However, in addition to the absence of violence, participants felt that to be and feel safe they needed an acknowledgment that violence was not acceptable or normal, for other issues that compromised safety (especially parental AOD misuse) to be managed and for wider threats to be reduced. They believed that their sense of safety would be improved if they were provided respite from their home situations, given assistance to deal with issues and helped by staff and services that were empathetic, trustworthy, collaborative and enduring. Young people, in particular, wanted to feel 'visible': to be seen, heard, listened to and supported alongside their family members.

[Safety is when] no-one is being emotionally, physically or any type of thing and as long as people are [being treated decently] - no-one is taking away that from them because, sometimes I think people don't realise that emotional safety and not being abusive in ways, is just as important sometimes. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25 #5)

All right. Safety to me is everybody watching out for everybody else, because not one person can do it in my family so everybody is watching out for somebody else, there's no violence happening and there's no aggression, you know, someone's allowed to be angry but there's no aggression comes to it and that pretty much makes up my house, because my house has always got yelling and screaming in it, someone is getting told off for something or someone didn't get something or someone took someone else's thing. (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F6)

When asked what safety meant (in addition to the absence of violence), most young people spoke about being with family, their parents being able to care for and protect them and to not have to worry about themselves or other family members. Parents appeared to find the question more difficult and were more likely to talk about 'unsafe' home environments and implied that safety was the management of the stressors that existed alongside violence.

Fathers, for example, often spoke about fights with their partners, financial pressures and general stresses that, they argued, led to violent outbursts. Mothers, on the other hand, spoke about a lack of safety and the difficulties they were experiencing. One mother identified things that made her home unsafe:

> *Domestic violence, drug use, alcohol use, pill popping, a lot of just — I don't know, environment that is filthy and unhealthy, and unsafe. I don't know, I wasn't a very good parent. I didn't know what I was doing. And I can't really explain that. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER. #M2O)*

She went on later to talk about what she wanted to have been able to provide for her children:

> *Providing food, shelter… and clothes, good quality clothes. You don't have to have toys all the time, but some toys…. To be a good parent. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER. #M2O)*

Aboriginal families often referred to safety in relation to their families and communities. Despite challenges within many of their communities, being connected to culture, to community, and to positive role models was valued. Aboriginal families often also indicated that to get help to deal with issues of violence they needed to work with culturally safe organisations. Culturally safe organisations recognised the challenges facing Aboriginal families and intergenerational trauma and separation, and provided supports in ways that strengthened rather than minimised the cultural connections.

For families to feel and be safe they needed:

- **The absence of threatened and actual violence:** participants most often talked about how violence needed to cease for them to be and feel safe. Although they reported that they generally felt safer during periods when there was no violence, many clarified that the fear of assault was prevalent and restricted their sense of safety. For some young people and mothers, the unpredictability of the violence meant that they could never relax and were constantly hyper-vigilant and on-edge.

- **To understand family violence and appreciate that having violent or abusive parents was not 'normal':** mothers and young people who had only known violence felt that it was important for those experiencing it to know that it was not inevitable or acceptable. Similarly, young people valued knowing that their parents' behaviours were not appropriate and that having an abusive parent was the reality for others too:

> *I would have liked to know, to be reassured that it's okay [not uncommon] to have shitty parents, like I have shit parents. That took a lot to just accept and then I was sure that only one of my parents could be shit. I was like, I can't have both my parents be shit, so not that it was okay to have shit parents, but I would have liked to have known that like, it's a thing that can happen and it's happening to me. And I would have liked to have just learnt that that wasn't normal, like the way that Mum acted [her violence] wasn't the normal way to act, a lot earlier, because it took a long time to realise that. (YOUNG MAN, aged 15-18 #YM5)*

- **Non-threatening supports**: that provide information but also peer support for mothers and young people who need to leave violent situations

> *Like I said, if I'd known that something even remotely like [a service where you could get information and peer support] was around back then, how different my world would be. Because I would have had a person that understood me and got me and wasn't judging and wouldn't be telling me that you don't do this and do that, but walk the path alongside me. Which is one of the things that I think a lot of these girls need. They don't need to be told go and do this, go and do that, check out this, check out, hey, how about we just go and grab a coffee and we can go and see what's around? You know, it's so much easier than, well, I feel. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M7)*

- **Supports to deal with underlying issues and challenges**: participants identified that safety was compromised by alcohol or other drug use, mental health issues, poverty, trauma and ongoing challenges. Some participants argued, therefore, that violence was linked to other problems and supports were needed in these areas.
- **Certainty that their loved ones were safe:** in addition to needing to be protected from harm, mothers and young people felt that their unease was heightened when they believed that their children and siblings were also unsafe.
- **Time away and respite**: young people reported that they needed opportunities to spend time in safe places with safe people. Sometimes this was with extended family members and friends.
- **Support networks**: were valued by all participants. Sometimes these were informal and needed to be forged, strengthened and repaired when relationships were estranged. Formal supports were valued under the following conditions:
  - **Victims felt as though they were believed:**

    When there's people that will actually look after you and listen to what you are saying. That they would actually believe and do — like try and do something. (YOUNG MAN #1, aged 15-18)

  - **Were available:** regardless of whether parents knew or gave permission, or not
  - **Were built on respect**: for individuals and their needs, feelings and experiences
  - **Were trustworthy:** where families could rely on workers or services to protect them and assertively help them when they experienced challenge
  - **Were empathetic**: for the family situation, including an understanding as to why leaving violent homes is difficult, and about the challenges families faced:

    Well, from my case I would say [we needed] a lot of understanding, it is a very traumatic time for everyone… [a good worker] they just seem more understanding, some people and they care more and that they realise that it's actually a really hard time whereas you get some people where it's not much more than that. (YOUNG WOMAN, AGED 19-25 #5)

  - **Were collaborative:** to ensure that the needs of each individual and the family as a while were being met
  - **Were enduring**: workers and services were most appreciated when they were available for long periods of time and not just during periods of crisis:

    One of the biggest things is, I think, empathy, because a couple of times I came across certain people that I assumed at that point in time to be false or they really didn't give two shits about me and my position. So I just put up my walls, and I thought well fine, I'm not going to ask for help, or you felt degraded or you felt like you were this small and you just wanted to run away and hide. So the way you approach people is actually a big thing because someone in that position is actually quite vulnerable, and if you come across as either attacking or manipulative or someone who doesn't really care, they're going to go back into their hole and try and hide away. They're not going to seek the help that is out there. So it's the way people communicate and come across to you. Empathy is a big, big thing and if you can gain the trust from someone then they're going to come out more and express more that's happening and not try and cover it up or say okay, you don't really care so I'll go away. So there's two parts for that. The services need to be there. The knowledge given to you easily and is quite forthcoming, but also then approachability and empathy and that towards the person as well. Don't judge a book by its cover. You don't know the story of why that person is suffering. It could be multiple reasons. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M4)

- **For parents to understand what was going on for children**. Parents and young people reported that during periods of violence, parents did not always appreciate the nature of children's exposure or impacts of living in violent homes. Having opportunities to share and listen were valued:

> *And look out for those children, because sometimes a mother's so blind, and it's not their fault, but they're just so wrapped up in their own emotional [problems] (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #14)*

- **Visibility:** young people reported that it was vital for them to be seen as individuals with needs and wishes that were related to but independent from their families. They wanted workers and organisations to engage with them directly, and explore their concerns, regardless of the parents' preferences:

> *I don't care how old they are, as long as they can speak, they can verbalise it. So they need to listen to the children because the children are so honest, because they don't know what is right and wrong to say. My children never had a voice. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M5)*

Case Study 2: Cassie

Cassie[5] is 17 and lived with her parents who both had significant drug issues until she was 13. Often her parents would become violent when they were using or 'coming down' and Cassie had to protect herself and her two younger siblings. Cassie had sought help from the police and child protection, but Cassie reported that these staff had not intervened. After school, Cassie would often take her brother and sister to the library until after dark so that they were not alone with their father as he had assaulted both Cassie and her Mum and threatened violence when affected by drugs. One night on the way home from the library, Cassie and her brothers were caught in the rain and cars passed by but failed to stop to ask whether the three children were OK. Cassie's little brother asked her why no one stopped, "can't they see us?" he asked. In her interview, Cassie likened that walk home to her experiences of the family violence and child welfare systems: although many workers came in and out of their family home, she and her brothers felt totally invisible and believed that no one cared. She felt that she and her brothers would never be safe until people saw them, protected them and responded to their individual needs and wishes.

Fathers who used violence also felt that their family's safety was strongly aligned to the absence of violence. Often explaining their use of violence in terms of their own past problems, perceived difficulties in relationships and conflict within their relationships with their partners, they were more likely to prioritise needs that reduced stressors and provided them with support to have their needs met. Fathers argued that they needed:

- To have better strategies for dealing with stressors: within their families, relationships and households;
- To have better relationships with their partners who appreciated their needs and saw them as much of a priority as those of mothers and children;
- To better understand the impacts of violence on their wives or children so that they could better appreciate the harm that was being caused;

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[5] To protect participant's anonymity names and identifiable details have been changed. Cases may be an amalgam of two stories interwoven when participants' experiences are similar.

- To understand that there are alternatives to the violence that they had encountered during their childhoods, and within past relationships and which they had normalised that were as effective in managing stress and conflict and asserting themselves and their needs; and
- To have services that were accessible and responsive to men and their needs and demonstrated understanding, empathy and respect.

4.7 Engagement with services during periods of violence

As highlighted in Section 4.4, families experienced significant challenges and adversities and needed help. Many of the families, however, reported that they had little or no support during periods of violence – from their families, friends, communities or services:

No one referred me to anywhere. So that's the saddest really. I mean, you can be angry and whatnot now, but when you're in that frame of mind you can't think logically, okay, I'm going to go into the yellow pages or I'm going to go to the directory, I'm going to go to the library, or I'm going to go here and try and find this, this and this. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M4)

There was no support in this area, even with family, you know. The hopes from family was, "You're going to lose your children and this and that if you go back to him." See there was no hope in that area; there was discouragement, you know. (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F4)

As discussed briefly in Section 4.5, fathers and male partners threatened mothers and young people to not talk about their situations. This led mothers and young people to not talk to their extended families about their experiences. Those who did share their experiences did not receive the much-needed support. These participants reported that the support was not forthcoming because their families did not know what to do, saw violence as a private affair or were not close by:

Not up here. No. I had no one. No. It was only phone calls to my daughter or Mum really. They were the only people I spoke to. So brothers didn't get involved, they're boys, but it was all phone communication, because I wasn't even allowed to go interstate. That was one of the conditions. So I wasn't even able to go down there and visit them. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M4)

Sometimes this was because they were unaware of what assistance was available, sometimes because they were concerned that seeking support would lead to statutory child protection involvement and often because they were isolated from support networks, often due to the controlling behaviours of a partner.

Further, participants reported that support was rarely offered, and this was thought to be a result of keeping the violence and its impacts secret. One young person argued that all those working with children and young people should be vigilant for indicators that a child might be unsafe and actively intervene:

Like if they are acting, like, sad, then there's something wrong. If they are constantly arguing with their parents, then something's wrong probably. If you see any marks on them, something's wrong. (YOUNG MAN, aged 15-18 #YM3)

Others recalled, however, that neighbours, extended family, schools and doctors were often aware that there was violence in their homes and that mothers and children, in particular, were negatively affected. They believed that such people may have been reluctant to intervene, or as will be seen later, some even responded in unhelpful ways.

4.7.1 Police

Many of the families in one jurisdiction identified police as a professional group with whom they had interacted during periods of violence. For some mothers, police were supportive and helped them to escape the violence. Others considered the police potentially helpful but did not seek their assistance for fear of reprisal from abusive partners:

> *I think it's because – I've been too scared to open up to the police. Like, ring the police and tell them what's going on and stuff like that because he's very manipulative. He threatens me to the point if I do that he's going to, pretty much, hurt me. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M2)*

However, many mothers and young people who were survivors of violence shared experiences when they encountered police who treated them poorly or were unable to effectively intervene. From these positive and negative experiences, parents and young people felt that it was imperative that police be empathetic, understanding and compassionate towards those who were experiencing violence and assertive with those who use violence and actively challenge their behaviours:

> *Trying to relay that to police and they, sort of, look at you like you're full of shit. So, like, going to the police in a circumstance like that, yes, you're going to get some police that are compassionate and empathetic, but you also get your handful that really don't give a shit. So, now, when you're in a position where you're trying to get out and you're trying to keep yourself safe and trying to keep your children safe, and you've got police officers that don't care (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M6)*

Some of the young people reported that they felt disbelieved by police who did not appreciate the challenges that they faced. For some, they believed that police did not value children's perspectives and dismissed what young people disclosed. Others reported that police prioritised their parents' accounts over theirs and were not willing or able to spend more time assessing the validity of the differing perspectives. Some young people reported that this was particularly the case when their mothers, who were also victims of violence, told police that there were no real threats and that their children were being dramatic or overstating the risks. Skilling up police to better engage children and young people was considered crucial by some young people:

> *When I was reporting it the police officer was really mean because I was telling him about the situation and he's like, "Well, it seems like to me you were just being a spoilt teenager." (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25 #YW1)*

Participants also believed that police were restricted in what they could do, often only offering legal suggestions which were not always accessible. Young people were highly critical of the options available to police, even when there was compelling evidence that violence was present. Mothers in one jurisdiction reported times when police instructed them that unless they pressed charges there was nothing else that they could do. Parents and young people argued that laws and practices must change to ensure that issues were resolved:

> *Police didn't do a damn thing, the amount of times that police were called and I know because I called them myself, "Oh, all we can do is make the note on the file or we can take him and we can detain him for 24 hours and give him a cool-off period but we can't do anything else because his name is on the lease or so we can't stop him from coming to his home." Like, piss off, what a joke (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1+)*

Conversely, fathers sometimes reported that they felt judged and had been treated unfairly by police who, they believed, were quick to "take women's sides" without thorough investigation. They felt that it was quite appropriate for police to challenge their behaviours and to hold them accountable for violence but that police also needed to understand the contexts within which violence had occurred. It is beyond the capacity of the research team to verify the claims made

by the fathers who reported that their partners misled police and made false allegations which were left unquestioned.

Similarly, men who had not used violence but had experienced it reported that they were apprehensive to get police intervention, feeling that they would be judged or that action would not achieve a positive outcome.

4.7.2 Schools

Schools were identified as having an important part to play in supporting children, young people and families experiencing violence. Firstly, two of the young women reported that they believed that schools could provide students with information and education about violence and to challenge their early views that violence was 'normal' and to be expected. One young woman surmised:

> They teach a lot of stuff in school but what they should be teaching is a lot of the things that everyone faces after school, like – exactly like the abuse – they do a lot of [work on] bullying and stuff in school but bullying kind of outweighs as people get older, grow up and mature, but it's things like the real life, the real world … but a lot of people who I feel like don't know or they're not aware of the types of abuse or the things that people actually face, the problems people face in everyday life. (YOUNG WOMAN #6, aged 19-25)

Secondly, she and two of her peers (and a number of mothers) believed that more needed to be done in society to empower young women, to improve their sense of self-worth and to have higher expectations of themselves and relationships – efforts that should begin during childhood and at school. At the same time, they argued that it was necessary for the whole community to challenge violence and for individuals to step in when they were confronted by it. A mother, a young woman and a young man all believed that education was a fundamental first step:

> Like a lot of young women… don't know their worth. They look at things around them and they grow up having the same values as everyone else and, you know, those values might not be necessarily right, wrong and stuff. The best way to explain this; they don't know their worth. They just settle for what they think… We need to teach them early that they have worth and for some values [that sustain violence] to be argued. (YOUNG WOMAN #6, aged 19-25)

Furthermore, young people believed that schools could play an active role in identifying and supporting children in families affected by violence. However, many of the young people reported that they believed that schools were often unaware of their family's circumstances or unwilling or unable to respond:

> I came to school with a concussion…I had been hit… and I needed to get out of the house. So, that's sort of what I was like when I came home and I told my dad, "Look, I'm not okay," but they sort of didn't take any notice. So, I ended up going to school, and I just couldn't function. So, I just broke down and ended up telling someone, and that's when like the school became involved. And so, I guess, that's like – I find that I'm very – because of having this sort of throughout my life, I've been very good at hiding my feelings. (YOUNG WOMAN aged 15-18 #YW1)

They reported that they were often apprehensive to raise their personal circumstances and were not always provided assistance at school when they did:

I spoke to my school counsellor about a lot of [my mental health issues] and the hardest bit about that was I spoke to her during the whole period, before, during and after [living with violence] and before [I left] I didn't tell her what was going on and then I did after because of what affect it had on me, but they didn't give us any help... The only time they did was when my school counsellor was like "you need to go see someone that has got more, I guess a higher level, a psychologist maybe?" I don't know exactly what she meant. (YOUNG WOMAN, AGED 19-25 #YW5)

I know — I remember the schools knew that something wasn't quite right, we'd come to school bruised and battered and, "Please don't call my mum," and that sort of thing, getting in trouble, "Please don't tell my mum," because we knew we'd get in trouble and hit, I just wish someone had stood up for us, no-one really took an interest in us... my mum's very good at manipulating people into seeing what she wants them to see, so we could be bruised and battered and, "Oh, she fell down the stairs," and they believed her and I wished someone had gone, "No, that's not right," and some had stood up for us. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25, #YW7)

Young people believed that teachers and counsellors at school needed to be more assertive in asking children and young people if they are safe and to use their professional judgment to determine if a child is being harmed, even when they say that they are "fine"

Ask the questions, don't take no for an answer because that's — I got very good at hiding myself until I met my psychologist who saw right through me, but if someone had asked the questions earlier on and not just taken, "I'm fine," as an answer I think it could have been a lot different.... Don't brush it off as too hard, I've been put in the too hard basket a few times and it doesn't make you feel very good and it makes you want to close off more, so even if you're struggling with the story or the child or the adolescent or whatever. Even if you're struggling to connect or don't just go, "oh, well, we'll hand you off to someone else", try and put some steps in place to make it — make them feel like they're not a burden, make them feel like they can reach out to you even if you can't deal with it. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25, #YW7)

In situations when they came to school injured or when staff from their school were aware of fighting at home, young people hoped that schools would intervene to help to reduce some of the risks. Although some schools referred children to child protection, to counsellors or external supports, young people generally reported that they did not meet children's greatest wish: for adults to help stop the violence:

At school everyone knew that things weren't OK at home. Mum and Dad had been to school high and throwing their arms all over the place and acting out. But no one ever did anything about it. We had dirty clothes and didn't always have food. They got us into [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services] and HeadSpace but didn't do anything about what was going on at home. (YOUNG WOMAN, AGED 15-18 #YW4)

Some parents spoke about how schools partnered with them to provide a safe space for children, to ensure that children were provided the assistance that they needed and to manage the ongoing challenges they experienced. This required schools and parents working collaboratively, openly communicating and having shared goals.

Yeah. They've been absolutely amazing, when I enrolled [my children] there, when [we] first moved into the area. I kept the school in the loop with everything, like, down to court orders and things like that, that if [my ex-partner] rocked up there to see [my son], that, like, he's just to piss off, sort of thing. Court cases, adjournments and things like that, I kept them in the loop. We got a new principal, she started not last year, the year before, so once she started, I did the same thing. I got in there and I kept the school in the loop with everything [MOTHER, #M6]

4.8 Engagement with Child Protection Services

Families had varying degrees of engagement with child protection during periods of violence, including during assessment, child removal and care placements.

4.8.1 Assessment

In three cases, young people reported that they themselves had contacted child protection and reported their concerns. They felt betrayed when child protection staff visited their homes, interviewed parents and assessed their homes without either speaking to the young people or adequately considering their views or wishes. These young people also believed that child protection staff should have done a more thorough investigation to see whether they and their siblings were safe and being cared for:

> *[They should be] just investigating a little bit more, if you'd opened the cupboards you would have seen the dirty dishes hidden and not just dirty: mouldy, disgusting dishes, and if you'd opened the fridge you would have seen no fruit or vegetables or anything sustainable and things like that, things that kids need... just the basics, if people had just asked the questions in a different way and tripped her up a little bit, things could have turned out so much different. And I'm not saying I wanted to be away from my mum, I do love her despite everything, but I wish someone had tried to set her on the straight and narrow. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25, #YW7)*

Other young people were critical of their interaction with child protection during investigations, reporting that they were either unprepared to talk about their family situation, because it was uncomfortable meeting with child protection staff with other family members present or because they were worried about the consequences of disclosing violence when abusive parents became aware of these disclosures:

> *The Department. Like, they didn't do a very good job. They sort of rushed it, and they also, with the interview processes, they put myself and my sister in the same room. And that made it really hard for both of us to open up, because we have very different views on what actually happened. So, they weren't able to actually get what happened. And I wasn't able to discuss things, because my sister has different views on what happened to me, and everything, because she has never really experienced it as much... Because, as I said, like, she has had – her life is different from mine, and how she sees it is very different to how I see it. And putting us in the same room, like, she just shut down. Completely. She wasn't able to really talk, and all she ended up saying was that it was fine. And I wasn't able to talk freely because if I had, she would have gone back to my parents [and told them what I said]. (YOUNG WOMAN aged 15-18 #YW1)*

Positive interactions were those when child protection workers met with children separately, provided them a safe space within which they could talk about their concerns and gave them opportunities for them to talk with their families about what they wanted and needed to have in place to be safe. Young people reported appreciating having opportunities to speak with a trusted worker who had spent time building trust and rapport, demonstrated that they believed young people and took their experiences seriously and generally wanted to know what the young person wanted and needed to happen to improve their safety:

> *I thought that was really good, though, that she actually just asked everyone. And so I saw her separately first, because then she's able to personally have us in a separate room, and asked us about how we felt in a safe place... And then from that, she asked us, you know, "what do you want to achieve from this?" And we were able to then come together as a collective (YOUNG WOMAN aged 15-18 #YW1)*

When asked what they would have liked during periods of violence, participants most often identified assistance in leaving violent partners or, preferably, for the violent parent o be removed. When this was not possible (participants recognised that child protection had a limited purview), participants hoped that workers would help them find support. However, families rarely recalled such assistance being provided.

Mothers often shared that their initial encounters with child protection were flawed. They often believed that they were being judged as parents who had somehow allowed their violent partners to be abusive and to place their children at risk. This was despite significant efforts and energy invested by mothers to protect their children – efforts that often threatened their own safety as they stood between violent partners and their children to ensure that their sons and daughters were not harmed.

Several of the fathers in the study who assumed a protective role reported that they often encountered workers who were dismissive of their role as parent and were less supportive than the fathers believed they would be if they were working with mothers. They reported that they had to spend considerable time demonstrating that their female partners were unsafe, and that they were equipped to parent their children.

One young woman whose siblings had been removed shared that she had wished that child protection had removed her also – so that her parents were made aware that she was unsafe and not been adequately cared for. She was confused as to why, if child protection believed one child was unsafe, other children weren't also assessed as being in need of protection.

> *I, kind of, wish that when [child protection] stepped in with my brother, that they'd stepped in a little bit more with me too, maybe placed me with my dad or – because I could have gone to my dad's or grandparents or someone like that. Yeah, they didn't remove me, and if he was at risk then why wasn't I deemed at risk, there's nothing in the court files to say that my dad had stopped that from happening or anything like that, so there should have been something for me to be placed somewhere too, why was it just him that was just taken? It doesn't make any sense to me. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25, #YW7)*

4.9   Summary

Among the sample, most families were affected by personal and familial challenges that existed alongside and may have exacerbated the nature and impacts of family violence. Many of the parents had had adverse childhood experiences, had witnessed or been victims of violence, had been affected by family conflict and breakdown and some had spent time in care. In addition, many parents had previous relationships where they had experienced family violence and separation, and some had a partner who had died. Many parents reported that they had other children removed (which also caused them distress) and were struggling with mental health and alcohol and other drug issues.

The nature and experiences of family violence varied across the sample. Most commonly violence was used by male adults (including mother's partners and children's fathers) and was directed mainly towards mothers but also towards children and young people. The violence was physical, emotional and psychological and coercive and controlling, Young people experience physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect. Often participants experienced different forms of violence at the same time.

The impacts of experiencing violence were significant and included physical injury, emotional distress, relationship breakdown (between violent family members and their partners and children but also between protective parents and siblings), and social isolation. Young people often felt responsible for the safety of their mothers and siblings and, like their mothers, placed

themselves in dangerous situations to protect them from harm. Young people's wellbeing and their education was negatively affected.

During periods of violence, mothers and young people wanted the violence to stop and help to escape if the threats were ongoing. Safety was intrinsically linked to relationships with protective others and to feeling like you were being cared for and supported and that the important people around you were not being harmed.

Although most families had little engagement with formal services during periods of violence, they did have interactions with the police, schools, and child protection. Responses were valued when they recognised that only the user of violence could be held responsible for their actions, that families (mostly mothers and young people) need to be supported and protected from harm, were available, respectful, empathetic and trustworthy and, ultimately, worked to ensure the safety of each family member. However, many participants who were the victims of violence reported not being believed, being judged, and encountering workers or programs that failed to act to improve their safety. Many were sustained in violent homes and felt unable to escape.

Workers and services working with families who may be experiencing family and domestic violence must understand the dynamics of violence, appreciate the needs and wishes of all family members (including children and young people) and work with others to either ameliorate risks or enable families to escape. Child protection plays a role but so too do other universal services who share the responsibility for keeping children, young people and families safe.

5. THE NATURE AND EXPERIENCE OF SEPARATION

Families in the sample were recruited after experiencing some form of separation. In some instances, this separation occurred when individual young people or parents escaped violent homes with or without their siblings or children. Other families were separated as a result of statutory intervention by child protection authorities or when a parent was incarcerated

In the following sections, we discuss the nature, experience, challenges and supports provided to young people, parents and families during separation and separation. As will be seen, the experiences of the different groups varied, but shared was an underlying need to have some kind of ongoing connections with family, to feel assured that family members 'left behind' were safe and that services and supports that understood the impacts of family violence worked collaboratively to respond to the impacts of violence and separation were consistently shared.

Within the sample, some of the young people had older siblings who were removed or who left home to escape violence. In these instances, young people recounted being confused as to why their siblings might leave without them, sad that they may not have an ongoing relationship and anxious because their older siblings had often attempted to protect them from harm:

> *And then my brother was taken away and I was very lonely, I remember being very lonely, I remember just spending a lot of time with my mum on the couches and watching movies very late and that sort of thing. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25, #YW7)*

> *My brothers left because they couldn't take it anymore. Dad was really laying into them and it was unsafe. So from then on I had to look after myself and my [little brothers]. It was a huge responsibility and I wasn't ready for it... and I really missed my brothers. (YOUNG WOMAN #4, aged 15)*

5.1 Families where young people left home without statutory intervention

A number of families were separated when one or more children left home. Young people from this group shared that this often occurred after periods in which they were the direct victims of assault, when they felt unable to continue living in their families while violence was sustained or, in a small number of cases, when they were "thrown out" by one or both of their parents. Often believing that they had no other choice, these young people moved out to stay with friends or family. In two cases, young people went to stay at a homelessness service as no other options were available:

> *And when I came home my dad was really mad at me because him and my mum had been fighting. And … And so – so within that, I still wanted to like do stuff and hang out with like my friends. I could understand that they were arguing, but like, I mean, I also wanted to go out and get out of the house because it was impacting me a little bit. And then things just really escalated from that. And probably over the course of like Thursday through to like Monday, I just felt so unsafe, like my dad just wouldn't like leave me alone. I stayed in my room, I just didn't want to go out and out of my room because I just – I felt so anxious and icky, and he'd always come into my room and I would just like shake. And I just didn't feel at all safe even though he hadn't hurt me. And so from that, my mum had that – my mum had also been saying to people that she wanted to hurt me, and that I deserved everything that I've got. And those sort of two factors, plus everything that had happened previously, I just messaged my social worker and said, "I can't stay here anymore, like, I do not feel safe." And so, then I ended up leaving that Tuesday. And I haven't really looked back since. And I feel like even though, like, I miss home, and I have a dog who is like – we did everything together – like, I just miss all of those things, I feel a lot Karma has come to you, like, a lot of good things have been happening, and I feel that this has been a good decision. (YOUNG WOMAN aged 15-18 #YW1)*

5.1.1 Challenges related to children leaving

Children and young people who independently left their families experienced difficulties in leaving and safely staying away from home. Many felt afraid for other family members who stayed at home, they encountered challenges in finding appropriate and safe alternate living arrangements and in maintaining relationships with family and friends.

Fears for family left behind

Young people reported that their decision to leave was a difficult one. This was particularly the case for young people who had shouldered responsibility for protecting their siblings or mothers; they reported an overwhelming sense of anxiety for their family's safety:

> Yeah, it's hard because my – when I was a child there wasn't really a safe place, my mum wasn't a safe person, her partners weren't safe people, the only time I was truly safe is when I was with my dad, but that meant my siblings weren't safe so there's, yeah, it's not an easy answer to that unfortunately. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25 #YW7)

Although these young people were living away from home, some continued to "check-in" on family members and provided assistance from afar. One young woman, for example, spoke about how she would meet her siblings at their school, buy them lunch and ensure that they were feeling safe.

Mothers also talked about how these young people also expended a concerted effort to encourage their mothers to leave violent relationships, while young people reported that older siblings who were living elsewhere tried to help them find alternate arrangements so that they too could leave.

Feelings of guilt

Young people also spoke about feelings of guilt in leaving their families behind. This was particularly the case for those whose families experienced harm while they lived away. They believed, however, that they needed to prioritise their needs while believing that maybe there would be less conflict in their families if they had difficult relationships with their parents.

Estrangement from families

Amongst the sample, young people who had left voluntarily recalled breakdowns in relationships with the families left behind. They reported that their families felt betrayed and that the consequences were difficult. One young man, for example, spoke about coming home for Christmas. He shared that his parents bought expensive presents for his younger siblings but only bought him a block of chocolate, a purchase that he felt was an afterthought. This compounded his sense of disconnection from his family and caused him great pain:

> When I came back [for visits] it was hard. It was hard all the time I was away. Like one Christmas I came home and they wrapped up a block of chocolate [as my present]. Everyone else was getting presents and it was hard when they were unwrapping like all these tools, expensive stuff, and I didn't get anything. It was like I wasn't part of the family anymore and they hadn't really thought about me. (YOUNG MAN, AGED 15-18 #YM4)

Other parents and young people recounted similar stories of 'awkward' family functions when families came together. In many instances, there were conflicts between young people and their families, with some young people deciding to sever relationships even with family members with whom they had good relationships. One young person who left home after experiencing violence at the hands of her father and conflict with her mother who "always took his [father's] side", reported that these difficult relationships became even more problematic after leaving home. However, she also reported that having some physical distance from her parents afforded the opportunity to "take control" of the relationship and establish new boundaries:

I was really afraid of that first initial meeting, because I didn't know, but from there we've sort of been doing those baby steps, and like, I saw my dad and my dog, and like we walked the dog with mum and stuff. And like there's still those boundaries, I don't want to talk about any of the bad stuff until I have a mediator, but I am happy to see them in like a hanging out sort of – sort of - just to see them, tell them I'm okay and I miss them, too. (YOUNG WOMAN aged 15-18 #YW1)

Precarious living situations

Although young people who had left home did so for safety reasons, rarely did they or their parents characterise their new living arrangements as being safe. In addition to the feelings of guilt and worry discussed above, young people also spoke about being exposed to other violent and unsafe adults and peers in their new accommodation. Some young people moved to live with families who were using drugs or alcohol, who were also struggling with financial stress and who were not always able to care for an additional person. This caused mothers, in particular, a great deal of angst – as they worried for their children's safety but felt unable to leave their partners or get their children home safely.

Young people who moved into homelessness services talked about difficult relationships with many of their peers but appreciated the support of new friends and workers. Although these new arrangements were often problematic, young people generally felt that they were preferable to living at home. This appeared to be because young people had greater control (they could choose to be there or not), because the threats to their safety were not as constant or significant and because they felt less responsible for others they lived with.

5.1.2 Safety needs of young people who left home voluntarily

During periods of voluntary separation, young people needed their basic needs to be met, to be provided assistance to overcome the impacts of the violence that they had experienced, assurance that their families were safe and assurance that their families were receiving assistance to be protected and, where possible, to leave violent homes.

- **Safe and stable accommodation**: was vital for young people leaving home. As noted, many young people reported that although they had escaped violence, they continued to feel unsafe as their living arrangements were not stable and were often not a long-term option and because they continued to encounter peers and adults with problematic behaviours. Access to priority housing was sought by three young people.

- **Financial assistance**: was identified as a need for many of the young people who often had to become financially independent. Challenges in receiving Centrelink payments, rent relief and assistance to pay for daily and educational essentials were noted. One young person sought assistance from child protection to help with these costs but was informed that they were not eligible as they were not clients of the service and would not be eligible as they were living away from home.

- **Support to deal with the impacts of violence**: was important but rarely offered to young people, even those engaging with formal youth services. In some instances, it appeared that youth services were not aware of the nature or impacts of violence and saw young people's separation as a positive thing without recognising that many young people wanted to sustain or create new ways of relating to their family members.

- **Assurance that their families were safe**: was something that had a great impact on young people's sense of safety. Although they had left home, young people still wanted to know that their families were safe and that underlying issues (such as AOD use, mental health problems and a lack of support) were being dealt with.

- **Assistance for their parents to escape violence**: was a priority for many of the young people who believed that things would fundamentally change if they were given accessible and appropriate alternatives where all 'safe' family members could live together.

- **Contact with siblings and protective parents**: was often sought by young people who wanted to sustain these relationships, to be assured that their mothers, brothers and sisters were safe and that they could be relied on during periods of challenge.

- **Involvement with organisations working with families**: was sought by young people who became aware that family support agencies were working with their parents and siblings. They wanted to be able to have input into how their families were being supported and information about what was being done to keep their families safe. In some circumstances they understood that organisations were working with their parents to equip them to have their children return home. They appreciated this but often reported that they were not involved in these conversations.

- **Mediation with family**: may have helped young people manage difficult relationships with their parents. Young people did not necessarily wish to return home but often wanted to re-establish relationships with parents. For this to be achieved, some young people felt that they needed someone to help them communicate with their parents and to help their parents understand their thoughts about their parents' violence, drug use and parenting.

5.1.3 Engagement with services during periods of voluntary separation

During periods of separation, young people who had left their homes voluntarily reported that they had some, but limited, support from counsellors and youth workers, at their schools and from family support services.

When reflecting on what they wanted from the service system, young people continued to emphasise their desire for services to deal with the violence often still present in their family home or assistance in helping their mothers and siblings to leave violent homes and for programs to be made available (if not mandatory) for their family members who were using violence. They reflected that although they received some support themselves, services with whom they interacted rarely had a good understanding of family violence, its impacts or of how violence had affected and continued to affect them after leaving home.

Young people felt that efforts to assist them deal with emotional issues were compromised by their ongoing concerns for their family member's safety and, in a few instances, their precarious living conditions:

- **Child protection:** Amongst the group of young people who voluntarily left home, few had any interaction with child protection during periods of separation. Some had attempted to receive support with basic living costs or for help for those with whom they were living to cover their additional costs. They reported that their requests were denied as they were not formally clients of the service, despite the fact that often their siblings were receiving assistance. Young people also reported significant challenges in maintaining relationships with siblings who were in care and identified the child protection system as a key barrier to sustaining these relationships.

- **Counsellors and youth workers:** Several of the young people reported that they had been referred to a counsellor during periods of violence or after they had left home. They conceded that there was some benefit in being able to talk about their feelings but also believed that this assistance was limited by the fact that the causes of their emotional

difficulties were not addressed. One young person believed that to be effective, counsellors needed to work collaboratively with services that could reduce the violence and other challenges their families were experiencing or, at least, to be more appreciative of the impacts of their ongoing concerns. Similarly, young people sometimes had interactions with youth workers, including when they were staying in homelessness services or other youth accommodation. These youth workers were often recognised as young people's primary and most important support.

I want to be a counsellor for youth. [I've been helped out by a great youth worker]. Yeah, she's my role model… She is technically the reason why I wanted to be a counsellor in the first place (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25 #YW1)

However, many young people reported that workers did not always demonstrate a good understanding of FDV and did not take a role in providing support to the whole family.

- **Family Support Services**: As noted above, some of the families were engaged with intensive family support programs. Young people appreciated the support that was being provided to their families and identified a number of positive changes that they had seen: that parents were more aware of their problems, that they were being supported to get help to manage their behaviours and they appeared more invested in changing conditions at home so that their children could return. Interestingly, when pressed, many young people reported being unaware of what actual supports were being provided to their families and shared that they had very little interaction with these workers or services. They believed that family support was only for parents and that they and their siblings could not receive support themselves.

- **Schools**: Many of the young people who had left home reported that they had dropped out of school or had enrolled in alternate education. However, a number reported that they continued with their education with varying degrees of assistance from their schools. Some spoke about positive relationships with teachers and counsellors who helped them with their new living arrangements. More, though, reported that their schools either were unaware of their circumstances or did not take a role in supporting them during periods of separation.

Case Study 3: DJ, Alice & Jeremy

DJ[6] is 17 and lived with his mother, Alice, and his 3 siblings until he was 15. DJ's biological father suicided when he was young and his mother re-partnered with Jeremy, a man who had also lost his wife some years before, and his two children. When they first met, Alice thought that Jeremy would make a good father, having two children already, and displaying care and concern for her family. However, when DJ was 15, Jeremy started to drive a wedge between Alice and DJ who Jeremy considered "not my son". When Alice stood up for DJ, Jeremy became violent and assaulted both of them. DJ felt betrayed when his mother told him that it would be best for him to leave but also appreciated that his mother and siblings would do better if he was not around. DJ went to a youth homelessness service who chastised his mother's decision ("We can't believe any mother would turn her back on her own child"). This caused him great distress. He "switched off" and "shut down" and refused counselling or support because workers had demonstrated a lack of understanding of his situation and his Mum's difficulties. His major concerns were for his younger brothers who, after his departure, started to bear the brunt of Jeremy's aggression and Alice who was also affected by Jeremy's violence. When his brothers were removed, DJ was not allowed to have access with them and Jeremy restricted his interaction with the remaining children. DJ doesn't ever want to return home but desperately wants his mother to be given support to leave Jeremy and for him to have an ongoing relationship with his siblings.

5.2 Families where parents escaped with their children

The majority of the parents, usually mothers, who were the survivors of violence recalled many times when they planned to leave their violent partners and recounted numerous attempts. Young people also spoke about an enduring wish that their parents would take them away from violent scenarios and create new lives free of threat.

However, many of the families reported that this was near impossible during periods of violence and chaos and the significant barriers that restricted their departures and their ability to stay away. Mothers who did flee often spoke about the real danger involved in their leaving and the ever-present threats that took their toll. Many were not able to take all their children with them, others talked about dangerous encounters with their ex-partners and problematic responses from the services with whom they interacted.

In this section, we explore some of the factors that kept mothers from leaving, some of the challenges they encountered when leaving and the nature of their interaction with services and supports. Due to the nature of the sample, many of the mothers who escaped violence had their children removed after separation – these experiences will be further explored in Section 5.3.

5.2.1 Barriers to mothers escaping violence with their children

Although women who were the victims of violence recognised that they and their children were unsafe and were concerned about their children's wellbeing, many reported significant challenges in separating from their partners and escaping the violence. These included:

- **Conflicting feelings about their partners:** were raised by a group of parents who observed that sometimes their partners were caring and good fathers but were also violent. This made it difficult for them to decide to leave abusive relationships.

- **Threats from partners**: who claimed that they would hurt or murder mothers or their children, who would self-harm or suicide or intimidate extended family members.

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[6]To protect participant's anonymity names and identifiable details have been changed. Cases may be an amalgam of two stories interwoven when participants' experiences are similar.

- **Manipulation by partners**: three mothers reported that their partners took advantage of their fears about child protection and threatened to report them if they did not return home. These mothers felt that they were more likely to keep their children if they returned home:

  So when it all blew up either way I was going to lose my child. Yep. They said if you have contact with him we'll remove your son. He's saying if you don't come meet me I'm going to ring [child protection] and tell them that you've had contact with me and you'll lose our son. So regardless of what I chose I was losing my son. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M21)

- **A lack of financial independence**: made it impossible for some mothers to leave, knowing that they did not have enough money to provide for their children, pay for accommodation or travel to another city:

  Yeah, one of the things as well that caused an issue that I remember is that because [my father who was abusive] made a lot more than Mum, money then became a huge contributing factor, right, so because there are no services available that would have helped Mum mitigate the fact that within that partnership she was living at her means but should she leave, the debt, so that she carried, like, on the car or anything like that or getting a rental because she was a full-time mum, her leaving would have been put – it would have meant that she was then living beyond her means and there was no help to try and mitigate that, there was no help to try and figure out, okay, well, what can we do, so she was – as well bound by the fact she couldn't effectively afford to leave with kids (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1+)

- **Pressures from extended family members:** who made claims that children were better off with an abusive father than no father at all.

- **Isolation from support networks**: was an issue for mothers who were pressured to move away from or disconnect from their families during periods of violence and could not draw on them due to geographical distance or because the relationships were severed:

  So my kids were really little when I left, so that was pretty tough being a single mum with three little ones, and not having any family in South Australia made it even harder. And that was part of his whole control and violence was to get me away from my family in WA which he succeeded to do. And got me back over here to where it was him and his family and I was stuck. I was really stuck. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M7)

- **Fears of being single:** was a concern by some parents who did not feel equipped to live independently or raise their children alone.

- **Fear of separation from children:** when it was not possible for mothers to take their children with them.

- **A lack of awareness about services:** to assist families escaping violence.

- **Poor responses from those who might offer support:** many of the mothers reported that mainstream services often were ignorant or dismissive of the real threats of violence, that family violence services did not proactively assist them to return their children and that child protection focused more on their inability to protect their children than on their strengths as a parent. This led many mothers to resist engagement with services:

I still didn't know who to turn to or where to go, and at one stage during the breakdown I did try leaving a few times. He pinned me to the ground. He shoved my head in the door. He pinned me on the bed until I told him I wouldn't go. So then I decided to sneakily drop the kids off at school. I had them all on my own and I was going to withdraw them from school and say look, I'm going. So I dropped my youngest one off first... at kindy, and then I went to the school, dropped the kids off and then it was probably about half an hour after that I decided to go back and I said, "Look, I'm taking the kids out. I can't do it anymore. I've got nowhere to go but I'm going." The school stopped me from taking the kids. They put the kids into — the school into lockdown. They called the person involved, that I was trying to run away from.... [They had a meeting with my partner, child protection and I] and between [them].. they said the best thing for me is to go home, communicate with him and sort things out. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M4)

Case Study 4: Dana and Marcus

Dana[7] was 22 and had a 6-month-old child when she decided that she needed to leave her partner, Marcus, who was physically abusive. Realising that she was probably going to leave, Marcus threatened that he would call child protection and tell them that she was an unfit mother who had left her child with him, knowing that he was unsafe. He recognised that he may be charged with assault but told her that he'd prefer this to her being away from him. After a week of such threats, Dana took her son and tried to leave. Marcus threw her out of the car so she climbed in the back with her child. Marcus drove through the town, driving over roundabouts and crashing into a tree. Dana took her child and fled into the forest while Marcus screamed threats to her life. He left and rang the local women's services telling them that he would kill the staff if they took her in. Dana was assessed as unable to protect her child, who was subsequently removed from her and placed into care. Marcus completed an anger management program and sought for the family to be supported to come back together. Dana believed that the system put pressure on her to return to a violent relationship. Her child protection worker told her that she was more likely to have her child returned if she had stable accommodation: "like if you moved back home".

After sustained periods of violence, many of the mothers attempted or successfully escaped the violence with some or all of their children. In many instances this was a gradual move, with mothers reporting multiple unsuccessful attempts to leave:

"[I would leave] But then [my partner] would wriggle his way back in somehow. Because I was so emotionally wrecked from everything, [I'd] just fall for his shit and I'd say okay. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M8)

5.2.1 Safety and support needs during periods of separation

Only a few of the parents in the sample had remained separated from a violent partner for any real length of time. However, a majority of mothers and a small number of fathers shared their multiple attempts to live independently and reflected on what they needed during these periods.

- **Anonymity:** was essential for parents escaping violence who needed to ensure that their violent partners were left unaware of where they were or how they were living. Many parents, however, reported that their privacy was inadvertently compromised by services which led to their partners tracking them down. Centrelink and banks disclosed their new addresses to their partners and details about their new lives were shared by schools.

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[7] To protect participant's anonymity names and identifiable details have been changed. Cases may be an amalgam of two stories interwoven when participants' experiences are similar.

- **Viable accommodation:** was essential for families escaping violence. Optimally, families wanted for violent partners to be removed or voluntarily leave from their family homes but reported that this was rarely an option and was infrequently supported by the system. When families escaped, they needed financial support to attain independent property and to help pay rent while financial stability was achieved. This accommodation needed to be suitable for children as many reported that child protection would not place children in their care until adequate housing was attained:

  Yeah, I strongly believe in what I see in America, and America actually do this for drug addicted mothers as well, but also women that have experienced domestic violence and at that time are still unable to have clear judgment because of the trauma or the violence... [Mothers have a right] to have houses, [there used to be such a house but]... I don't know if it still exists. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M3)

  If that was me and people were in my situation, I would take the mum and the kids... and the kids and put them in a hotel, and then help — try to help them get a house... And even if they're blacklisted, I will try my hardest to — like, these people are in need. They need help, motherfuckers. (MOTHER #9)

- **Financial assistance:** was considered vital by mothers and young people who reported that to be safe they needed money to be able to pay for essentials so that they did not feel pressure to return home:

  and it's not to say that a financial handout for every DV victim is the way to go about it but just some sort of financial service that could help to understand where to go from that point or how to — or at least how to speak to — if you've got a financed car how to speak to someone, how to go through financial hardship and how to actually set yourself up to be able to stand on your feet because you've left somewhere where you now you've been a stay at home mum and you don't effectively, and I'll use the quotes, "you effectively don't have anything," what do you do in that situation? You're forced to stay [or go back to a violent home] because you feel like you don't have the financial means to provide for the family, if you go where do you go, if you take the car, okay, you can sleep in the car but the car is going to get repossessed, there's just — there was nothing like that either. (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1+)

- **Contact with their children when apart:** Support was needed to stay in touch with family members left behind. Parents often recalled that child protection and family support services were not often in a position to assist when remaining parents refused contact between siblings.

- **Psychological and emotional support:** to deal with the trauma they had encountered while living with violent partners.

Fathers who remained at home when their partners escaped with or without their children also identified a number of needs, including:

- **Support in caring for their children alone when their partners had left home**
- **A service system that was not prejudiced against men and fathers**
- **Support to deal with their anger and other issues**

5.3 Child protection removal and separation

Within the sample, 11 families were separated as a result of one or more children being removed by statutory child protection services. The nature of these removals varied greatly between one family and another as did participant's understanding of the reasons why removals occurred. As discussed in 4.4, violence often occurred in families experiencing significant challenges and participants often recalled issues such as problematic drug use, criminality and complex family relationships which may each have played a part in the child protection agency's determination that children needed to be removed. However, many of the mothers and young people often reported that it was the violence, and assessments that mothers' were unable to protect their children from harm that was the determining factor.

Who was removed and which children were taken also varied amongst the group. In some families, whole sibling groups were removed together, in others individual children were removed at different times and for different reasons. Sometimes children were removed while living with parents who used violence, when protective parents had escaped the violence or when a young person had voluntarily left home sparking the removal of younger siblings.

In this section we report on some of the shared experiences of families across the sample and attempt to provide insights from those with differing circumstances.

5.3.1 Assessments

Many of the families who were interviewed were uncertain as to the reasons why their children were removed. They recalled that they were either given very little information about child protection's rationale for the intervention or given information when they were not in a position to understand or digest the reasons as the experience was stressful and coalesced with other difficulties.

For example, two of the mothers reported that their children were removed while they were in hospital for surgeries related to assaults from their partners, a father reported that he was incarcerated at the time and was contacted through the prison staff and another reported that it occurred when a child had left to live with an extended family member.

> *I just woke up in hospital because after I have a seizure I get taken to the hospital, they just lay me in a bed until I wake up and then, yeah, at this stage I'd woken up and then, yeah, I had the [child protection] standing there saying that they were taking them. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #14)*

As noted above, some of the families had had multiple children removed at different times. They recalled that it was confusing to them as to why it was determined that they were not adequately caring for an individual child while other children were left at home.

Some of the families believed that their children were removed due to their exposure to family violence, because they themselves had been assaulted or because child protection believed that parents were deemed unfit parents because of the violence perpetrated by their partners.

> *That was their reasoning, that if you can't protect yourself, you can't protect your children, but they would not give you any resources to protect yourself. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M5)*

Coupled with exposure to FDV, some families believed that children were removed due to parental drug use and child neglect. In two instances child protection became involved after children had experienced child sexual abuse by a male adult caregiver or family acquaintance and child protection services determined that parents had not adequately protected them from this abuse.

In a number of families, mothers shared strategies that they had implemented to protect their children which were characterised by child protection as examples of neglect. Sending children out of their homes during disputes, instigating fights so that their male partners would assault them instead of their children and sending children to extended family members for extended periods of time were all examples that mothers believed were in their child's best interests. They advocated for training to be provided to child protection to better understand family dynamics and strategies used to minimise risk.

Case Study 5: Millie

After a prolonged period of violence and a vicious attack, Millie[8] fled her home with two of her four children, seeking help from her biological mother. On arriving at her mother's house Millie blacked out and was taken to hospital where she discovered that she had "massive internal bleeding". While in the hospital, police interviewed Millie who was reluctant to press charges, fearing the consequences for her children who were still at home. When child protection arrived, she begged that they intervene and remove her older children who were still with her partner. Child protection did an assessment and determined that the two children staying with her mother were more at risk as their grandmother had also been victim of domestic violence and had been assessed as an 'unfit parent' for her own children. Child protection believed that she could not demonstrate that she would be able to adequately for the kids in her care. Millie's two oldest were left with their abusive father and the two youngest were placed into care. Millie was told that the children would be returned to her and that she could seek custody of her older two when she had recovered from her injuries and was able to find stable accommodation and demonstrate that she could protect them from further harm. Without her children Millie was unable to secure a place on the priority housing list and did not have the financial resources to pay for a deposit. It was two years before her children were returned – during which time her children had had eight foster placements. Millie reported that support to help her mother care for the children while she was in hospital and a coordination of child protection, housing and family support services may have helped to shorten the period of separation and the trauma she and her children experienced.

A lack of warning or chances to make change

Many of the parents who had their children removed reported that they had had very little, if any, engagement with the child protection system prior to their child's removal. This meant that the decision to have their child removed seemed abrupt and, in some cases, unforeseen. What was common across this group, however, was a desire for child protection (and other organisations involved in reporting concerns) to have raised their concerns for children's safety prior to removal. Many of these mothers felt that such prior warning would motivate them to either leave violent partners or to make changes in their lives so that they could provide for their children:

> *And I think, like, personally, if they're going to remove a child, that, yeah, my [child protection worker] didn't actually do any meetings before removing my kids. I think they should have let me have my kids a bit longer and do the – if this doesn't happen by this time, we'll look at taking your kids into care. Or if this does happen by this, certain time, then we won't take the child. They didn't give me a chance, they just neglected it and threw it down the drain, like, she's sixteen, two kids, we'll stand over her, that's how I see it. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER. #M2O)*

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[8] To protect participant's anonymity names and identifiable details have been changed. Cases may be an amalgam of two stories interwoven when participants' experiences are similar.

Decisions to remove children instead of supporting mothers and children to escape

In four interviews, mothers reported that their children were removed as they attempted to or had escaped violent situations. In one case, a mother reported being 'betrayed' by the child protection agency who she had turned to seeking financial support and other assistance to enable her to protect her kids and leave a violent partner. She recognised that, in the past, her children had been harmed but could not understand why the system did not appreciate the steps she had taken to ensure their safety and that she needed assistance to care for them rather than have them removed.

> *I told them from day dot if you feel the need to remove my son then you need to remove me as well. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M21)*

> *So they need to support women in saying even if this is happening, it's not your fault, not go and go through it more and prove to us that you can stop it when it's obviously — if you could stop it you wouldn't let it happen. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M5)*

> *[T]hroughout the whole pregnancy they were aware of [how overwhelmed I was] and they sent me to a hotel room for a night, and you knew that I had nowhere to go, and it wasn't until I was in the last month of the pregnancy it was like "oh, hey, we're going to contact you and we're going to put you in the house", and I think "is this so you knew where I was or is this because you actually wanted to help me?". Because I feel like throughout the pregnancy, while it was happening and I'm reaching out for help, it was more about someone would speak to me and put me up for the night, it was more like of an assessment, "are you in a level one or are you in a level 10?"... And once we've worked out what that is, we're going to hang up the phone and our job's done, but I was ringing up not to be assessed about how bad the domestic violence was... I was ringing up to get out of that domestic violence. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M2)*

> *If that was me, I would take mum and their kids and put them in a hotel room, so then they're away from that violence and they're together, and then try to get them a house... way from that situation. [Rather than just taking the kids]... and then leaving the mum in that situation still. And making her get out herself, which, yeah, I did. I'm proud of myself. I did, but I had to do it the hard way. I would have made it so much easier if it was me. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M9)*

> *Yeah. I hate that women, well, the majority of women, not all, but mostly women and children are removed from their homes when their partners are behaving badly. It should be the other way around. Yeah. That's what safety means to me. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M21)*

Young people also were critical of the decision to be removed. One young man spoke passionately about his frustration that he and his siblings were removed 'for their safety' but that his mother, who he believed was the main victim of her partner's violence, was left in an unsafe environment and that no assistance was offered to protect her. He called for child protection to 'remove' all family members experiencing violence feeling that statutory intervention was needed as an impetus for change but felt that a whole-of-family approach was required.

> *One big one would be, before you go taking kids, really try and help the family because I remember one specific situation where my mum was just so sick that she was like do what you have to, change my kids' last names, do what you have to, we will move if we have to, to get out of the situation and they said, "No, you have to get yourself out of the situation, you have to prove to us that you can keep yourself safe, first." (YOUNG WOMAN, AGED 19-25 #5)*

5.3.2 Placements of children

Among the sample, children and young people were placed in a variety of settings, for varying durations. The experiences of young people varied, often based on the nature of their care placement but also the safety and stability that they experienced.

Types of placement

Children and young people were placed with kin, in foster care and in residential care.

Most families shared that their preference would be for children to be placed with family members or friends. However, some (including Aboriginal families) believed that non-kin placements may be safer for children due to the ongoing tensions that characterised their relationships with their parents and other relatives, because extended family were often also caring for other children and because having anonymous carers would make it less likely that violent partners would find their children and cause them harm. Some families reported that they believed that resources were less likely to be provided to kinship carers who had to manage multiple children while having to restrict access to potentially abusive fathers or mothers who may be threatening or put pressure on them to do so. The decision to not seek kinship care caused further tension within extended families.

In some instances, siblings were placed together which was, most often, their and their parents' preferences. However, many large family groups were separated and youth and parents reported that siblings had little contact with their brothers and sisters for some time. This was distressing for older siblings who had assumed responsibility for looking after and protecting their siblings and younger children who felt isolated not only from their parents but from siblings who they would often turn to for comfort and reassurance.

> [We were angry] Because [child protection] claimed they were going to keep them all together, right, because there was four at a time, they claimed they were going to keep them all together, all right, and they didn't. [One] went to [one town]. [Another] went to [another town half an hour away]. [My youngest], I don't know where she went, all right, because this is all secretive, it's all secretive, okay. (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F6)

Length of placement

Amongst the sample there was some variation in the time that children and young people were in care. For some families, separation only occurred for a number of weeks. Short placements seemed to occur when child protection deemed parents, often mothers, as able to provide for and protect their children but not yet able to provide them with stable accommodation. Parents in this group were often able to secure homes, sometimes with the support of community organisations.

Separation was prolonged for some mothers and young people when acquiring accommodation was difficult. In some instances, mothers reported frustration that the system was, as they saw it, working against them. For example, one mother spoke about not being able to secure priority housing as she did not have her children were with her and how she could not have her children returned until she was able to assure child protection that housing was available. It appeared that better communication and coordination was required to ensure that mothers and children were reunited in timely ways.

Other families in the sample reported that periods of separation were longer in duration because they were required to demonstrate that they were able to provide safe environments for children. This required them to deal with challenges that might limit their capacity to parent. This included parents' alcohol or other drug use and their contact with violent partners. As will be demonstrated, in 5.3.3, mothers and, in some cases, fathers worked hard to complete courses, to participate in programs and to show that they had taken steps to ensure their children's safety.

For some families in this group, separation was short-lived (i.e. for a number of months) but for others it took more time (i.e. for a number of years). In some instances, separation was prolonged due to issues within the child protection system: as discussed in Section 5.3.5.

Amongst the sample, parents (particularly mothers) raised their feelings of concern about the threat that their children might be placed in care until they turned 18 years of age. This was particularly unsettling because they believed that such a decision was underpinned by an assessment that they weren't nor would they ever be good enough parents. Some of the mothers in the sample whose older children had been removed appeared to have almost given up on having these children returned but used it as a motivation to demonstrate that they could care for younger children. However, other parents experienced the inevitability of their child being away until they turned 18 as being demotivating: they believed that there was nothing they could do to keep their children so "gave up trying".

> *Well, I had a hope where that Welfare told me I wasn't getting my children back. I've got no hope. They gave me no hope at all. I got hope that you're never ever going to get your children back; that was my hope. And I was [having to deal with many problems, living through] everything, through domestic violence and drugs, and alcohol, and abusing family, and you name it, and conflicts; so, it was a big war at this time. (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F4)*

Consequences of removal for parents attempting to escape

Four mothers reported that despite a lack of child protection involvement in their families' lives during periods of violence, children were removed after mothers took their children and escaped violent relationships.

Several parents recognised that they may not be able to fully care for their children during this turbulent and traumatic period. Often leaving everything behind, mothers reported that they did not always have the money to afford basic living essentials, rarely had suitable accommodation available and may not be able to provide a safe environment for their children to live. With limited assistance available, some of the mothers accepted their children's removal on child protection's assurances that this would only be for short periods of time.

However, these mothers also reported significant systemic challenges that elongated their separation from their children. In some instances, mothers were unable to access welfare benefits or sustainable accommodation because they did not have their children with them and could not predict when they might be returned. They reported feeling trapped in a vicious cycle that was against them when they felt most vulnerable. They felt let down by the system whose response to their situation was child removal rather than the provision of support to keep families together when they needed each other the most.

5.3.3 Separation

As discussed, children were removed in different ways, at different times and were placed in a variety of placement types.

Families had a variety of responses to having their child removed. For most, removal was an incredibly difficult and often traumatic experience. Removal was particularly 'devastating' for mothers who had escaped violent partners to be confronted by child protection systems that, they believed, blamed them for their children's exposure to violence or direct physical abuse and reinforced views that they were neglectful or failures as parents.

> *When I lost my kids, I was very – I wanted to die, I didn't want to live anymore. I didn't know what to do… They just took my kids away, and I never saw them again for a whole month after that. I never had no meeting, no contact, anything, for a whole month. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER. #M2O)*

In some families, particularly those who had already experienced the removal of other children, parents reported 'giving up', feeling as if it was impossible for them to have their children returned. In two cases, mothers reported having more children with their violent partners hoping that things might turn out differently this time. For other mothers and one father, child removal gave them the impetus to leave their partners or for they and their partners to seek help to resolve their issues and create safer home environments so that their children might be returned. Others spoke about families who went to hiding so that other children might not be removed.

Parents sought assistance
Mothers and fathers whose children had been removed and those seeking reunification recounted the significant efforts that parents invested to improve their living conditions, to build their skills to care for their children and to provide safe relationships and environments.

> *So when Mum started staying with me when she was getting everything back together and she was trying to sort her life out and move on from everything (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1+)*

> *Well, I'm doing mental health counselling. I'm doing drug and alcohol counselling. I'm doing a parenting course. I'm just doing everything in my will to make myself better to get my kids back. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M9)*

During these periods, families received varying degrees of support, including from:

- **Family support services** - who provided them: training on understanding children's needs, the impacts of trauma on the brain and on development, and ways that they could manage their children's behavioural challenges; safety plans to help them manage risks; and advocacy to secure stable accommodation, alcohol and other drug issues and contact. Family support services were primarily provided to parents, with limited interaction or supports provided directly to children and young people. However, parents relayed that they believed that family support services placed children at the centre of their work.

- **Aboriginal family support services** - were considered valuable by Aboriginal families who believed that the services understood their experiences and supported them to navigate the service system. As these programs were often available over long periods of time, participants appreciated the enduring nature of support. Having someone who can advocate on your behalf was seen as vital.

- **Peer mentoring** – was provided to many of the families who appreciated meeting and learning with and from others who were also trying to negotiate their children's return and those where family restoration and recovery were being achieved. In many cases, these supports were enduring, were focused on building on family strengths and on sharing strategies on dealing with challenges. Younger children sometimes attended shared activities.

> *The kids are always involved, always. They're never, ever pushed aside and if someone had have been in my life when I was going through what I went through, my children may have turned out completely different (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M7)*

- **Alcohol or other drug treatment and rehabilitation programs** – were accessed by a number of families who reported some success in dealing with their AOD issues. Parents in one family appreciated the great effort that their family support workers had invested in helping them to access these services but one father recalled having to leave a rehabilitative program as his wife couldn't afford or manage caring for their four children alone. AOD services did not always have a good appreciation of issues affecting families affected by FDV, child protection intervention or reunification.

- **Anger management and violence prevention programs** were attended by some fathers who valued understanding how their behaviours affected their families and alternate strategies for dealing with issues and tensions.

- Young people most often spoke about **counselling and mental health programs** which they believed gave them a safe space to talk about their feelings and emotions but, due to limited FDV literacy, did not always meet their needs. They were rarely aware of the services and supports being provided to their parents and families and had limited, if any, interaction with workers from these agencies.

- **Culturally competent and culturally focused support** for children and young people was identified as a key need during periods of separation, however only two families recalled this being available for the children in the family. In another case, a non-Aboriginal father spent considerable effort in ensuring that his Aboriginal children could participate in cultural activities to reinforce their cultural and community connections and strengthen their cultural pride.

Parents often believed that it was important for child protection workers to recognize that it was often a struggle to meet the system's expectations, particularly when they were experiencing grief, loss and concern for their children. They were also critical of child protection workers who they believed had unrealistic expectations about parenting, particularly when the workers had not raised children themselves or encountered or had to manage personal issues like the ones many of the families were. They thought it was important for workers to recognise their efforts, to be more empathetic and patient and to actively support families who were struggling to find assistance to meet their needs.

> *Yeah. Yeah, I may have mental health problems and I may have all this and I may have all that but at least I'm trying. No-one's perfect, that's all I can say. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M9)*

5.3.4 Contact

During periods of separation parents and young people (from the 11 families that had child protection interventions) had varied amounts of informal and supervised contact with each other. Some families spoke about this being regular and ongoing while others talked about it being rare.

In a few instances, parents were not allowed to have contact with their children – particularly when court cases were proceeding to determine whether children had experienced abuse. Mothers found these periods traumatic and reported that their children had not been told why they were not able to see them and assumed that it was because they no longer cared.

they didn't explain to the kids why they couldn't see me, which was really hard on them. They just thought that I'd forgotten about them, which they did mention. We thought you'd forgotten about us. So that was hard. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M4)

Almost all parents and young people spoke about valuing the time they spent together – wanting to be with each other, to see how each was doing and, importantly for mothers and children, to ensure that they were safe.

However, some of the families found formal supervised access to be confronting and challenging. Some of the mothers, for example, found the contact to be sterile as strangers watched and judged their interactions with their children and gave them confusing advice. A number of the mothers talked about wanting to spend time with their children in 'natural' environments where they could interact with their children, have fun with them and enjoy the types of activities that they and their children were used to doing prior to separation. One mother talked about her challenges dealing with her child protection worker and the struggles she had during supervised contact.

Well, … when I have my visitation with my kids…, if they want to supervise it, that they should at least stand back from a distance… when everyone's around, I don't feel like a parent. I feel like I can't tell my kid off or – I told my son that he was naughty before, for doing bad – something, I can't remember what it was. But he did do something really naughty and my [child protection worker] were, like," don't tell him he's naughty. Let him go ahead and do whatever". And that makes me really confused, should I not discipline my child which is telling him he's naughty? Or if I just don't do anything, I'm not being a parent. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER. #M2O)

Despite these challenges, mothers and young people often reported that they wanted and needed contact with each other and believed that was central to the maintenance of parent-child relationships during periods of separation. The consistency and quality of contact during separation was seen as a factor in families' safe reunification.

They appreciated when contact was regular and incremental: when short visits were replaced by overnight or weekends with their children, during which their confidence increased and their children became more accustomed to spending more time with them. This seemed particularly important for mothers who had their children removed at birth. One mother described her concerns for her children who had been removed at birth and the confusion they experienced during contact. She was delighted to see that her children were starting to know who she was and that they would eventually be returned to her care:

Their little minds must be so confused. Like, they're confused because, like, every time when I access my little boy, … – he's only six months – I was like, look at Mummy, like – and he'll look at me and he's like confused, like, hang on, you're my mum, but I go back to this person every day, like, kind of thing, but he's starting to get used to it and he used to, knowing who I actually am, but my two-year-old he knows who Mum is (MOTHER #9)

[Child Protection realises that I'm doing well and at my last case conference they] said, like, they'll move forward, more and more forward and to the point where [my children will] at least spend a couple of nights at my house and then go back to their foster care parents and spend some time with them and then come back to mine and spend more time with me and then more and more and then they'll be home and, so, yeah, I'm very excited. (MOTHER #9)

5.3.5 Parents' interactions with child protection

As noted in 5.3.1, some families reported that they felt indebted to child protection for intervening: giving some parents the impetus to leave violent homes, to seek support and to begin taking steps to increase their capacity to care for their children.

Um, I think, um, I mean, I'm absolutely grateful the Department stepped in because I wouldn't have, I wouldn't be where I am now in regards to education, like learning how the impacts of substance abuse and DV [domestic violence] affect your children. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M11)

It's just that [child protection services] were on my side and I've done all the courses. I've got off the drugs. I've done everything possible to get my kids back, so I guess, nothing was going to stop me.... Talking for myself, I've never missed one appointment with the kids. I've never not seen them. I've never not gone to my courses. When [child protection] say jump I say how high? Because I want my kids back, not because I have to, it's because I want my kids back and getting clean and you know if someone's clean, or you know when someone's not clean. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M3)

Case Study 6: Kev & Sue-Anne

Kev and Sue-Anne[9] had significant ice addictions and were often violent in front of their three children. They recognised that they had a problem but were afraid to seek support for fear that their children might be removed. Fearful about this intervention, Kev and Sue-Anne refused to engage with local supports and moved their children to different schools when concerns were raised. After an incident when one of their children cried at school, fearful for their Mum's wellbeing, a report was made to child protection. Sue-Anne attended some drug counselling but when things were stressful, she started using again. After another violent episode when the police were called, child protection determined that the children were unsafe, and the children were removed. Sue-Anne went back to her drug program and worked hard to clean up the house and demonstrate her capacity to look after her children. Kev was less willing to change so Sue-Anne found alternate accommodation. After 3 months, the children were returned to Sue-Anne and things were going well until Kev moved back in. This took away some of the financial and emotional stress of caring for their children alone, but things escalated, Kev became violent and the children were once again removed. With help from a family support program and her child protection worker, Sue-Anne left Kev again, completed further parenting programs and had her children removed. She saw her children's removal as a "wake-up call" and Sue-Anne's determination to have her children with her helped her to make the difficult choices. Kev is now getting AOD services and is keen to re-establish relationships with Sue-Anne and the children but recognises that he may not live with them for some time, or ever.

Parents raised a number of challenging encounters with child protection during periods in which they and their children were separated including:

- **Limited information provided to or understood by parents:** many of the parents saw a lack of communication between themselves and the child protection system as problematic. They often reported not knowing or understanding why their children were removed, how long children would be separated, what they needed to do for their children to be returned, and how to be a better parent through the process:

    I feel that when my son was removed from my care it was, I understand it, because we were in a high risk situation and I thought I had it under control and I did not at all. So I do understand it but I think there could have been steps that were taken prior to that to protect not just my son but myself as well. I felt like the department stepped in, removed my son obviously, but left me to the wolf. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M21)

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[9] To protect participant's anonymity names and identifiable details have been changed. Cases may be an amalgam of two stories interwoven when participants' experiences are similar.

The same mother recounted needing information about why her child was removed but also an understanding of how child protection perceived her experience:

I went I know what I was going through but I didn't think that anybody else understood what I was going through. So it made me question, like, am I overreacting? Did I cause this? Did I bring this upon myself by not doing this or this? I was so beaten down I couldn't even trust my own thoughts and instincts. So, yeah. I think if they possibly presented me with the information that they had on him it would have drummed it home a lot quicker. Yeah. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M21)

- **Shifting expectations**: was raised as a concern by parents who reported that their child protection workers had laid out a set of expectations with which parents needed to comply before their children would be returned. Frustratingly, parents reported that these expectations often changed – sometimes because there were new workers and sometimes for reasons unknown to them – and sometimes appeared arbitrary:

  The hoops I had to jump through, and they always changed, every single time. I'd go through one, no, something wasn't good enough or something didn't happen or in my mind I had to be perfect for them to even then consider me coming back, and it was just, it was hell really, for something that I agree shouldn't have happened. I probably should have been stronger and left, but the help wasn't there, and it wasn't that I'd ignored it or swept it under the carpet or made light of it or anything. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M4)

- **Bureaucracy over care:** many participants believed that the system prioritised itself over families needs and wishes. They often saw child protection workers as being more punitive than supportive, focusing more on problems than strengths or helping families to find solutions:

  lot of that is actually, yeah, stemming from institutionalisation because [child protection]... I understand that they're there and they're there to help but I hate them, despise them, and maybe they've changed in the last couple of years but I do not like them as an institution, I think they're absolutely garbage and I feel like they created so many more problems, so many more because they did not give a flying fuck about anyone else's opinion except for their own... they were, like, "Yeah, well, we don't know how dire the situation was in the instance," basically victim blaming, right, your mum was a perpetrator so she allowed it to happen, they were, like, "We don't know how far her manipulation of you could go and we don't want that negative influence on the kids so we're barring you from having any contact." I said, "You can't do that, that's not legal, that's not — I have done nothing to deserve the sanctions you're putting on me, this is absolute bullshit." But, no, they didn't care and then it was just so — there were so many problems (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1+)

- **Apportioning of blame**: mothers who had been the victims of violence reported that the system unfairly judged them for their children's exposure to violence. This was particularly distressing for parents who went to great lengths to protect their children and reduce the harm. They accepted that violence was experienced and harm was done but also hoped that the system would acknowledge how they had "done the best we could". Parents who did not use violence, usually mothers, also reported that they felt judged by the system and child protection workers:

  [Child protection] did judge me quite harshly, and it was like me having to justify. That's how it came across. I had to justify myself and my predicament and prove that what I did or didn't know or witness or did do — it was like I was on trial, and people won't talk willingly, or it just takes longer for the situation to be resolved. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M4)

- **Limited appreciation of change** – families reported that it was important for child protection staff to recognise how they had made changes in their lives and to appreciate how difficult this sometimes was. Some families appreciated the understanding demonstrated by child protection staff but a larger group reported that this was not their experience

- **Turnover of staff:** families often reported that their child protection workers were constantly changing and that not only meant that as new workers began, they needed to "start again" but also that it was difficult to build trust and often found it difficult to identify who their workers were and to seek assistance

  > [Good workers] are the rarer ones, you only get to see them maybe three times because they are constantly changing … it's hard to get a good one you can trust and then they're gone [YOUNG WOMAN, AGED 19-25 #5)

- **Minimal family-focused support:** parents appreciated that child protection's purpose was to prioritise the needs of children. However, they felt that child protection might also help parents deal with their own issues so that they could be good parents for their children. They sought additional assistance or for child protection to work more closely with family support agencies to ensure that parents were having their own needs met.

5.4 Children and young people's experience of separation

Parents and young people provided accounts of children's time in care. For many these periods were traumatic, with young people reporting being constantly afraid: for their parents and siblings left behind, for themselves within their new environments and for their siblings who were placed elsewhere.

Amongst the sample who had been in care, a third of the young people who were removed reported that this was a good decision for them. When asked when in their lives they felt most safe one young person said that the only time she felt completely safe was when she was in foster care and another young woman characterised her time with one pair of carers as being the best period of her life:

> I think that's the safest I've felt throughout my whole life… we had dogs. Being with animals makes me feel a little bit better. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25 #3)

> It was the saddest and the happiest time, I was happy because I finally was in one school, I was making friends, I was quite popular, I'd never been popular before, I'd never really had friends before, my mum likes to shift around quite a bit, and so I was happy and my cousins were lovely, I got along well with all of them, I didn't have any fights with them even, it was just a very safe and happy content childhood, that's how it should have been. … Yes, I was sad because I missed my dad because he was working trying to set up our life, and I missed my mum and my siblings because I'd had all these kids around me for so long and then down to three. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25, #7)

When pressed about the positives of these experiences, the young people reported that having trustworthy and caring adults around and living in a calm environment were valued, particularly for the young woman who reported that she was recovering from "PTSD and depression and anxiety and all that good stuff."[10]. These carers were also valued because young people believed that they "fought for them", treated them like their own children and helped manage the sometimes challenging relationships young people had with their parents and their child protection workers.

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[10] YOUNG WOMAN #3, aged 19-25

Given the choice between being in a safe foster care arrangement and being home, most indicated that what they wanted was to be returned home but also for their homes to be safe. Some felt conflicted when safety wasn't assured:

> *Yeah, I was obviously very upset about what was going on, but it didn't stop me from wanting to be in her care. I didn't care enough about - I did care, I am trying to say it in the right way, it didn't affect me wanting to be there, that's how I mean I didn't care. Obviously, I cared about what was happening… [Life during that time was] Pretty sad. We didn't want to be there, we had some fun times as time went on, we had to make the most of what we could but, most of it was just wanting things to be back to normal. (YOUNG WOMAN, AGED 19-25 #5)*

Although some had positive experiences, most of young people characterised their time in care as being as unsafe or less safe than their time at home. These young people and their parents reported negative experiences in care that had enduring impacts, including:

Instability of placements

The young people who were taken into care often reported moving from one placement to another. During early times, foster placements were often short-lived (possibly while determinations were being made) and then children were moved to different homes. This was challenging for some who found it difficult to make trusting relationships with their foster carers or residential care workers:

> *So I left my first family when I was about 12 or 13 – or I wouldn't have been – no, yeah, like 13 or 14… I was getting to like teenager-hood and I was becoming quite rebellious and yeah, all that jazz. Like good stuff, yeah. So it just kind of broke down. [Then I moved to two more homes] And then when I was 18 years I was out of care but I was in a group home until I was – end of 17 kind of thing and then I went to another group home. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25 #3)*

> *We were placed in a foster care system which was really difficult, [my siblings], they immediately went to one of my aunts on my mum's side but then me and [my brother] we sat stagnant for I don't know how long it was but it felt like a very long time and that was really difficult to adjust with, and then [we were placed in another foster care placement and] readjusting to a new environment and the upset of the environment as well, it was [hard] (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1+)*

Degrees of support and care

Some of the young people reported that the care that they were provided by foster carers was special and helped them feel safe. For them, foster care provided them with the stability they needed to relax and start to manage the impacts of their exposure to violence.

However, in a small number of cases, parents and young people reported that children were not being provided enough support and care during periods of separation. One mother shared, for example, her concerns for her nine-month-old who she was still breastfeeding prior to his removal. Her children had relayed to her the fact that her child, who had never slept alone, cried and screamed each night and was not allowed to sleep with or be comforted by his older siblings. As his mother recounted:

> *[T]he kids were pleading to police that they would stay if they would just let [my youngest return home]… because they couldn't listen to it anymore, they couldn't watch him cry. I can't look at any of the photos for that two years in the period of their life, because my son is just a lost soul, it's the most important time of being – getting grounded of who you are and a sense of being or security and all those things, and understanding, and he just missed all that (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M5)*

Interactions between parents and carers varied greatly amongst the sample. Some mothers, in particular, talked about feeling as if their children's carers were friendly towards them, that

they were allies (wanting the best for the children and working to ensure that ongoing relationships were maintained) and sometimes advocating to child protection services for more support for the children and their mothers to ensure that their time in care was as least disruptive as possible.

However, this was not a universal experience. Some parents talked about having hostile relationships with carers who they believed judged them as parents and were dismissive of the parents' desire to have their children returned.

> *She was really nasty, just to my oldest son. And I seen her [at the] gate one day, and my son was shouting out to me. She wouldn't let me say hello. All I wanted to do was say hello to my kids and she just took off and swore at me and told me that she hopes I never get my kids back. I wanted to hit her, but I didn't. I just cried, to be honest. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER. #M20)*

Sexual Abuse

Three of the young people and two of the mothers reported that their children were sexually abused whilst in care. This was at the hands of a male foster or residential carer, and once by a peer while at school.

> *My biggest anger, my biggest anger is, the most unforgivable act, is that they were aware that they had a perpetrator, sexual child perpetrator working for them at the time they put him into the care of my children. He had had multiple complaints placed upon him — he has stolen my daughter's innocence. I believe my baby boy's, in my heart. And he physically attacked [my younger boy] by punching him in the head, and he was a very intimidating character, and the game that he played — I will not say worse because there's nothing worse than what he did, but with [the two eldest], he deceived them so well that they blamed themselves for being naïve, because they never suspected for a second there was anything wrong with his level of care. So he knew he was just so good at what he did, and for them to purposely let my child be hurt in the aim of him getting a couple more years gaol, that he can argue away anyway, it's beyond my comprehension and I don't know how to live with that. I took my daughter to the police station for a 50 minute interview whilst she was still in care. She spoke for 10 minutes of it. They wouldn't let me be with her. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M5)*

The young people who had already been exposed to physical violence talked about how these incidents had a huge impact on their lives. They reported being devastated that they were unable to seek comfort from their parents who they needed to help calm them and assist them to disclose their abuse and go through the legal system.

Older siblings also felt great guilt that their brothers and sisters had been harmed and reported feeling as though they had let them down. After all, they felt as though they had taken on shared responsibility for their siblings' safety while living with violence and that this was now their sole duty while separated from protective parents.

Young people also spoke about having their trust in adults and the child protection system completely destroyed — which influenced their interactions with other carers, their child protection workers and adults from community organisations. They expressed anger that they were less safe in a system in which they were placed to protect them:

> *I went through a really difficult time, more of an awkward time but I started to harm myself while I was in care and I wouldn't have done that, I don't think, if it wasn't for [my and my siblings' struggles] and then some of my siblings were abused during care so, that's not helping, that's making things worse. If we hadn't have gone into care — [if we'd stayed at] Mum's I can't say what would have happened with the abusive relationship, I would have hoped it would have ended the same or better, but I can't say... It was all a bit screwed. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25 #5)*

Relationships with siblings

Sibling relationships remained important for children and young people during periods in care. In some cases, family members were placed together while in others, brothers and sisters were separated. In both scenarios, older young people reported a desire to continue to watch out for and protect their younger siblings. They shared that they were often the ones who advocated for their siblings when they needed support or were experiencing difficulties, who reassured and cared for them and provided ongoing care.

Young people often believed that the system did not fully appreciate the roles that they assumed or the importance of the relationships that they maintained. One young man, for example, reported that while living in residential care, residents were actively discouraged from having caring relationships with each other and were regimented in how they interacted. He understood that this might be appropriate when peers were strangers but that it restricted normal sibling relationships, like his. For example, he was told that his younger siblings couldn't sleep in his room when they were upset or afraid and that he was not informed or given a say about how they might be supported. He described care as "institutional" and ignorant to the ways that family members support each other and the needs for intimate connections.

His frustration culminated when he turned 18 and was no longer in State care. He recalls having to fight to stay connected with his siblings during this time and the frustration that ensued:

> *And then the minute I turned 18 boom, didn't matter, did not care anymore, it was like I dropped from the face of the fucking planet, even when I would call to try and find out how the kids were doing, "Oh, I'm sorry, we can't divulge that information to you." "I'm part of the same case file." "You're over 18, you're no longer relevant, you are no longer a relevant part of this case file" … I wasn't allowed to message them, I wasn't allowed to send them Christmas gifts because they didn't know whether or not they were from me, or birthday gifts, if they were from me or whether they were from Mum. (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1+)*

Instability at school, with friends and extended family:

Although some effort was invested to keep children and young people at school, many reported being moved to different areas, away from their friends and extended families. As noted above, some young people saw schools as their primary support and reported that they found moving to a new school detrimental.

Similarly, when young people were placed in foster or residential care some distance from their nuclear and extended families and friends it was difficult to retain these connections. In addition, some reported that the child protection system and their foster and residential carers did not invest enough in supporting them to have ongoing relationships with these important people.

5.5 Impact of removal and separation for parents

Having a child removed was often traumatic for parents, especially mothers, who reported enduring feelings of guilt and shame coupled with concern for their children and their welfare and limited confidence that they could demonstrate that they were 'worthy' of having their children returned. For some, these impacts were motivating with some mothers and a few fathers reporting that it increased their determination to do what needed to be done while others reporting that the pressure was too much and paralysed them.

Many also believed that the stresses of removal and separation were unwarranted and were demonstrations of systemic abuse which punished them for violence that was out of their control. Others believed that a greater investment in keeping families together and safe would yield better outcomes and would prevent their children and families experiencing great difficulty.

Motivation for change

A small number of parents reported that child protection intervention was a positive thing for them. Mothers who were victims of violence reported that they had previously considered exiting violent relationships but did not have the confidence or capacity to do so. In other situations, mothers reported that child protection involvement removed the threat that an abusive partner would take a child away or keep another if she attempted to escape:

> *I think the best option was for [child protection] to come in and take the kids. Because he'd always keep one of the kids, like, you were supposed to be a family and making me feel bad if I left him and stuff like that. So it was the best thing for us to — for me anyway, to have the kids removed so then I get away safely and me recovering from all that. I couldn't really have the kids in my care anyway. I was pretty messed up. So it was good, just being really safe, all of us just to get away (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M3)*

> *I guess I'll never really understand why at that time I didn't really have the courage or the power to stand up and use my voice and say no and to walk away … I guess I felt a little bit alone at the time while it was happening, and I also knew how good the children's father could be and I'd previously been seeing him on and off for a two year period and he'd never abused me or spoke down to me once, and yeah, I fell pregnant and he was using substance abuse - which is no excuse, there's never an excuse, you should always be in control of your actions and what you're doing in your life, and yeah, I guess I just felt really, a bit like — I guess I was overwhelmed and I didn't have the capacity to override that overwhelming and really see the reality. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M2)*

Determined to be reunited with their children, these mothers reported that statutory intervention gave them the willpower to leave. Similarly, a few of the parents saw child removal as a 'wakeup call' and took steps to deal with issues such as their alcohol or drug use as well as their violence:

> *I feel like a lot of places did what they could [to get my parents to give up drugs and look after us children], but it was my parents that didn't really want to. So, I guess, I think probably like [threats of removal] is the only thing that really sort of plays into that bit. (YOUNG WOMAN aged 15-18 #YW1)*

A number of parents reported that they had grown through the period of separation and were proud of their success:

> *But I'm also very grateful for the journey too because it had made me a better parent in regards to my older children, the older three but also, um, what I can give back to community and how I can use that lived experience… I came to this wonderful place, yeah. That's how, um, I guess I gained my employment also (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M11)*

However, mothers and young people did believe that less punitive and more encouraging approaches may have led them to change their behaviours and protect their children — without parents and children having to experience the trauma of separation:

> *Yes, yes, because they're the ones that are putting themselves in it, child protection put themselves in it, right, and they see what they want to see. And I think it would help if — when it comes back to guidance and knowledge again, if they could say okay, listen, you have to clean up your house, you have to take the kids for counselling, all right, and they need to do all this so that we feel that they're safe. Not otherwise we're taking them, but if they can step in and give help to the parents, right, before they take the children, because at the end of the day it's our children, they feel us, they might have a bad time but that's what they know, they know us, so you're taking them away from their family and better off with their parents (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F6)*

And I do feel like me and my children have been punished for somebody else's actions, you know, siblings have been torn apart from each other and I've been torn away from my children and my children have been torn away from me and not having the opportunity to connect with family …and extended family. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M2)

Reduced safety

Some of the mothers reported that after their children were removed their safety was further compromised. In some instances, fathers blamed mothers for the children's removal. These fathers were often aware of the great pain that these mothers were experiencing and used it as a way of further manipulating them and undermining their identities as parents.

They set up safety plans that they wanted me to follow and – or not. And admittedly I ignored them but the reason being is originally he'd already found me. And the reason he'd found me is because I made a big booboo and led him to where I was. It was not intentional but it did happen. And that worried me because [child protection services] had already turned around and said, "If you have any contact with this man, because we see him as a serious threat, your child will be removed from your care.".. Well, I've already broken that rule. I have already got contact with him. So I was playing, like, a people pleasing role where I'm, like, I do not want [child protection services] to find out so I need to keep him happy and under control. And, yeah, like I said, I thought that I was managing it and I was not (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M21)

In other circumstances, mothers reported that violence escalated when children were removed and further conflict existed in their relationships. This was prevalent for mothers who remained with their partners as well as those who were living independently:

I just don't feel like I can keep myself safe in any way, shape or form, and I don't think taking the children fixes anything. It's made him more angry, it's given him more of a vendetta to come and act. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M5)

Fear for their children

Mothers and fathers who had their children removed generally recalled feelings of concern for their children who were placed into alternate care. As they had not met respite, foster or residential care workers they had no faith that these people were safe or that they could meet their children's needs. Even when they conceded that they were unable to provide safety for their children, parents needed assurance that the placements were appropriate and that their children were secure.

Parents were keen to meet foster or residential care workers and to know that these staff were safe. In some cases, parents reported getting to know their children's carers and appreciated the opportunity to talk about their shared hopes for their children. Seeing carers as 'partners' was important for many parents:

[My youngest son is] with foster carers and he's basically been with them his whole life, when he was a baby he'd originally been removed from the hospital and went – stayed with another woman which I'm not sure who she is, I have not met her, and yeah, then he went onto these foster carers and remained with them… And I don't know them, I don't know what they're about, but at the moment I'm just really trying to focus on getting to know them and a really positive relationship with them .. but I'm having a bit of a struggle, the foster carers are struggling with things and would prefer to keep things separated, so it puts me in a little bit of an awkward situation and I just want the best for my son and want to see him succeed and thrive in life. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M3)

Relationships with children

During periods of separation, relationships between adults and children were often tested. Young people reported that the longer they stayed in alternate care the weaker their relationships with their parents became. Mothers of younger children recalled, with some pain, how their children began to detach from them, even fearing to go to them during contact visits.

> So, it's hard to be separated from your kids, but I've never been apart from them. I've always watched my kids 24/7. There wasn't a time that I wasn't with my kids. And I guess the separation. Not having enough hours to spend with them. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M3)

> It rips you apart when you see your kids [after being separated] and they act like they don't know who you are or are scared of you. You need to build that trust again, and its bloody hard to do in an hour a week or whatever you're getting. (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F1O)

This was devastating for mothers, particularly when they already were experiencing guilt for what their children were exposed to while living in their care.

Parents, including those who were not users of violence, reported that the system actively discouraged ongoing attachment between them and their children. Phone calls were restricted as were opportunities for contact.

> Even after that, no, when they're in [child protection] care, all right, you can — you basically have to go through somebody else, then through somebody else to get to speak to them… There's a lot of walls. A lot of walls that you've got to climb over to get to that point of contact. (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F6)

This was distressing for parents and for young people who were used to daily contact. Young people reported that it was often their foster carers that facilitated ongoing contact with their parents — efforts that they appreciated greatly.

Feelings of guilt and shame

Having a child removed caused a number of parents, mostly mothers, to feel guilty and ashamed. Regardless of the reasons for their child's removal, parents reported feeling judged by their own families and friends — feelings that were often reinforced by workers within the child protection system itself. This was particularly distressing for parents who felt that they were good parents who had been in circumstances beyond their control. They reported feeling as if they were being treated like perpetrators of violence for failing to protect their children.

> In a way, you know, I feel like I was treated as a perpetrator [and] that's impacted me for life with the decisions [that have been made] (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M2)

They strongly believed that child protection systems needed to recognise that when their children had experienced or witnessed FDV it was often because they were overwhelmed by their situations rather than because they were failures or bad parents. They stressed the need for workers across the system to be optimistic about them and their parenting and to give them chances to demonstrate their skills, love and care. They also encouraged child protection workers to realise that they had found it incredibly difficult to parent their children, particularly when they themselves had difficult childhoods:

> I think they need to understand how hard it is to be as young as I am with three kids by two different fathers (ABORIGINAL MOTHER. #M2O)

> [child removal:] It doesn't, you know, doesn't necessarily make people bad people, it means they've made bad decisions out of what was going on in life at that time, and it shouldn't define who you are for the rest of your life. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M2)

Many fathers who used violence also expressed varying degrees of responsibility for their violence and, during periods of reflection, recognised the harm that they had caused. For some, this motivated them to make changes in their lives but for others it caused them long-lasting shame and guilt:

I was just a man with a crushed spirit, and a broken heart. (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F2)

Parents' identities

As briefly discussed above, separation took its toll on parents: on their sense of identity as a parent, on their relationships with their children and on the nature of their relationships with others:

[The child protection department] can't just come in, come along and say you're not good enough, and never say okay, you know what, we're sorry and you're doing well, or something, because all you do for the rest of your life is question your self-ability because you don't know what you're doing right and wrong in their eyes. There is no guidelines in their system. They make up the rules as they go. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M5)

The removal of children took its toll on parents' emotional wellbeing with some reporting depression, hopelessness and a general feeling that they were failures as people:

Because I know myself, when I didn't have my children, my first son was taken away from me, I went downhill. I went downhill really bad because I felt like I didn't have anything else, I wasn't good enough for anything else. So, yeah. I know what that feels like, to have that happen, and just be told, no, you're not allowed to see your child anymore. And, yeah, it does something to you. It just sends you a little crazy. (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F2)

5.6 Safety needs and supports during separation

Families reported that they needed assistance to both cope during periods of separation and for parents to demonstrate that their children could be safely returned. Supports were needed for parents (including those who did and did not use violence), for children and young people and the families as a unit and included:

- **Someone to guide parents and to be an advocate** as they attempted to have their children returned. This was vital for all families, however Aboriginal parents particularly appreciated having someone who understood their situations and were able to advocate for them within the system.

Is if we had a social worker that understood what we — what we were going through …Like, if I had someone on my side because I went into the office — I'd go into the office on my own feeling, I wonder if they're going to judge, I wonder what they're going to write down … And once I'm walking out it would be saying, you know what, you did a good job today…. Someone come alongside of me and be a mentor, be a mentor, maybe. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #12)

I feel myself that people that have been through it are your best sources of people. People that have just done textbook stuff, I'm sorry, it does nothing to actually living it. I mean, I don't remember, like, going way back, I don't remember what supports I did have. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M7)

Well to be honest, there should be more support out there for parents. Like, I know there's support for the kids but there's not really a person you could go, like, to these people, like, you can go in and you know that they're not on [child protection's] side or your side. They give you information about stuff. Like, I didn't know anything. Like, all the stuff I've been through, like, is still a blur, but, like, look like the legal process and all that, like I didn't understand any of it. If someone was actually there to sit with me and say this is what you need to do, and then sit in the meeting and say, "No. She's done this and this." Like, just support for like the parent or parents. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M5)

- **Parenting education and support** – Most of the parents had enrolled in mandatory education programs. Overall, parents found these sessions useful and helped them better understand their children's needs and how violence was affecting their children's growth and development.

    [We] definitely need parenting courses or classes so the parent can be a better person and so they can know what to do in situations, because if it's a baby everyone knows that babies just annoy the hell out of you, crying in the middle of the day, crying out in the middle of the night. And for some parents they can get a little bit frustrated and maybe hurt the baby. So in a way, if they're prepared – so maybe anger classes if they've got domestic violence... And definitely a counsellor. Not a psych but someone they can talk to or even a friend who's a parent or something, if they need to. That's what I tried to do one time. (NON-ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F13)

- **Helping children to understand their family histories** – Many of the parents felt that their children were not given enough information to understand what had occurred in their families, why parents were not always able to protect them or meet their needs, what they were doing to build their capacity to be better parents and to have their children returned. These were painful conversations for many parents but ones that they believed were imperative to allay children's fears and to minimise their resentment of parents who they sometimes believed had failed or rejected them. A number of parents gave examples of how they had worked with family support workers to write family histories for their children, who supported, led or independently provided information sharing with children and were available to listen to children and answer their questions.

    So, me and [my family support worker] actually wrote a book. But I haven't actually given the photo to go with it, so she writes – I sat down and wrote a little book and she's going to get it properly made so the kids know what happened and why it happened....Basically, just saying, in a child friendly manner, why the kids were taken, why they were taken and what I have to do to get them back. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M3)

- **Family mediation** – Young people who had left home often did not believe that their parents understood why they felt that they had to leave, why they could not yet return and what they felt needed to happen before their relationships could be restored. These are difficult conversations and one young person talked about needing support to be able to share her views with her parents and to develop a plan for managing her relationships with them.

    And it's like, it's more also, to – I want to do one session where I want to tell them, this is the reasons why I've left, these are things that you've done wrong, these are things that I contributed that I know that this was not the best. So, like really just do this one, get it all out, and then just so we all have knowledge, and what we need to work on. And then sort of from there, don't go back into the past and just start moving on. And where we can always, like – I really want an adult relationship with them. That was another reason why I left. Because they didn't parent very well when I was younger, and now they were doing – they were doing like a couple of parenting courses. And I turn like 18, as I said, in four months, and they wanted to make up for that time, when they should have been letting go, and that was really hard. (YOUNG WOMAN aged 15-18 #YW1)

- **Assistance to deal with impacts of trauma and separation** – Parents and young people recalled that there was very limited assistance provided to children and young people living in care to manage their feelings and their past and ongoing trauma. Young people were angry about the lack of supports available for their siblings and their view that the system was causing them and their brothers and systems more problems than they were solving. This frustration was amplified when young people were told that they had been removed from their protective parents' care when their parents had failed to protect them from harm or provide them with optimum environments within which they could grow and develop.

Yeah, it's just – and even, yeah, even with the girls I just I don't get it, if you are there to be helping with that situation and you can see that all of a sudden their grades have dropped and you're the ones who are managing their care plans and are reviewing their grades why does that not – why would you not say, okay, well, maybe we need to actually do something. I know for a fact that if I had kids and all of a sudden their grades hit rock bottom I would want to know why and maybe those kids aren't necessarily going to want to talk to you as a parent but if they've come from a traumatic situation there should be services, there's supposed to be services available or that's what [child protection] is there for, to be able to help them navigate that… everything is someone else's problem there. (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1+)

Young people often talked about wanting to talk to someone about their family situations but were often resistant due to the pressures from their families to keep their backgrounds secret, because they had had negative experiences with past workers and counsellors and because they were reluctant to share their stories if they believed staff had "hidden agendas" or were not going to be helpful.

[My first counsellor:] he generally did not seem to care about what I was going through, it was just like he had a checklist, he needed answers and that was that so I, yeah, I did not respond well to him at all. But then I had quite a bit of a freak-out panic, a meltdown in one of my classes at school, I was just – I don't remember what we were talking about but something triggered me and I just a complete breakdown and so they sent me to the school counsellor and she was really good… and she just, I don't know, she was just, like, "Okay, just talk." I was, like, "What are your questions?" I was – I could really – after everything I closed off a lot and it's – and that's something that actually is still quite relevant in my personality today, I'm very – I wouldn't say reserved - but I'm very – I'm hyper analytical of people, I always think about what their angle is, I don't let people in very easily, I am – I can be outwardly quite open but only giving enough to create the façade that I'm letting these people in whereas I'm gauging how much I actually allow them to be part of my life because I want to know how much damage they're going to create and so I'm very, yeah, this – I was very standoffish with her to begin with because I was, like, what, it's, like, "Why aren't you asking the questions, what's your problem? I don't understand this." So, but she was actually really good, she was, "Just talk," she was, like, "you just talk to me about whatever you want," she's, like, "I," she's, like, "it's up to you, this is your time." And so I decided that I would be a smart arse and I just started talking to her about stuff that was so not related to what I had been sent there for, I was talking about history and I was talking about books and I was talking about cartoon characters, I was, like, yeah, well, if you think that you're going to trick me I'm going to waste all of your time and eventually everything just circled round, she was very good at – I don't want to say manipulating because that makes her sound really dodgy – but she was very good at controlling the conversation I suppose, and so eventually managed to circle around after about 40 minutes and then started just having an absolute breakdown in front of her and, yeah, she was really, really – she was really, really good. But, yeah, I think it was, I don't know, initially I didn't much like the idea of talking to someone and then she actually left the school, they didn't continue her contract or something so she left and then – and I just stopped, I just – I didn't want to talk to anyone else anymore, so I haven't really touched this in 15 years (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1+)

Many of the mothers reported that the process of separation and the time that they were separated from their children was highly traumatic and often led to compounded guilt, a lack of confidence and a feeling of pessimism about their capacity to be good parents. Having someone to help them manage through periods of separation, to be optimistic about themselves, their parenting and their futures and to celebrate progresses and successes were considered vital.

They also greatly appreciated workers who "hung in" with them and when their support was available for longer periods of time. They often reported a frustration that workers changed constantly and that they were often unable to provide a variety of supports to meet their broad needs:

> *[I appreciate my worker] If I'm having a bad day, she's there for me. If I need help, she's there for me. If I've got an appointment, she's there for me... Like, she's awesome. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M9)*

6. FAMILY REUNIFICATION AND RESTORATION

As highlighted in the previous chapter, families in this study separated in a number of different ways and their experiences of separation varied significantly. As a result, there was great diversity in how, when and if reunification occurred.

When asked what they hoped for through reunification, families most often spoke about having their children returned to them or, at least, to have ongoing contact. This was important for parents who were desperate to know that their children were safe, to take on greater responsibility for caring for them and to reconcile relationships and build trust. Similarly, young people reported that they felt better when they were with their protective parents and siblings:

> *I am definitely better, things are getting better, especially because now I can see my family whenever I want to, and I know my siblings are happy because they are with my mum and it is nowhere near as bad as it was. (YOUNG WOMAN, AGED 19-25 #5)*

Although many parents had attempted to remain in contact with their children during periods of separation and to be as active as possible in helping to raise their children, they reported that it was only when they had them home that they could feel as though they were fulfilling their responsibilities. As noted above, parents' identities were often bound up with their parenting so some reported that they could only begin to re-discover themselves when they had responsibility for their children and were able to care for them.

> *Depending on how you look at it. So, for me, using that word, reunification, that was bringing my family back together. So, by going for full custody, I always vowed that my kids would be back with me. I didn't care how long it took, I didn't care what stone I had to turn over to prove that I was the right person for the job, I was adamant about making it happen. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M6)*

In a few, but not all cases, reunification was also about parents being reunited and reconciled with their partners who had done work to ensure that they could be good partners and parents. In circumstances where this was sought after, parents reported that these relationships offered them support in their parenting a sense that their family was "complete". As many of these families had experienced multiple parental separations, both parents and young people were aware that there were risks associated with a parent using violence returning home and were determined that they would not allow problems to re-emerge. Mothers, in particular, were clear that "this time" they would prioritise their and their children's needs and their desire to have their children with them over their partnerships. However, they were interested in giving their partners "a second chance" or a chance to redeem themselves.

> *Just – I really see him moving forward and I'm not oblivious to what's happened and what he is capable of, but I'm not going to live my life on what has happened either, I'm going to live my life on moving forwards, seeing the best in people and I think that's just who I am as a person. I believe in second chances, I believe there's somebody standing there doing the right thing, you have no reason to sit there going, but because you did something back here or this many years ago or this or that, like, that's it, you're just a bad person, you just don't deserve life. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M2)*

It should be noted that some parents reported that the system had a preference for whole families to be reunited and placed pressure on mothers to reconcile with their partners 'for the good of the kids'. This expectation was often reinforced by extended families and communities and was often contrary to family's best interests. This is a concerning finding, because prioritising reunification with violent parents over safety places women and children at high risk.

In this section, we will further explore families, parents and young people's experiences of reunification. We will explore what families needed to be and feel safe and what restricted positive outcomes being achieved.

A word on language

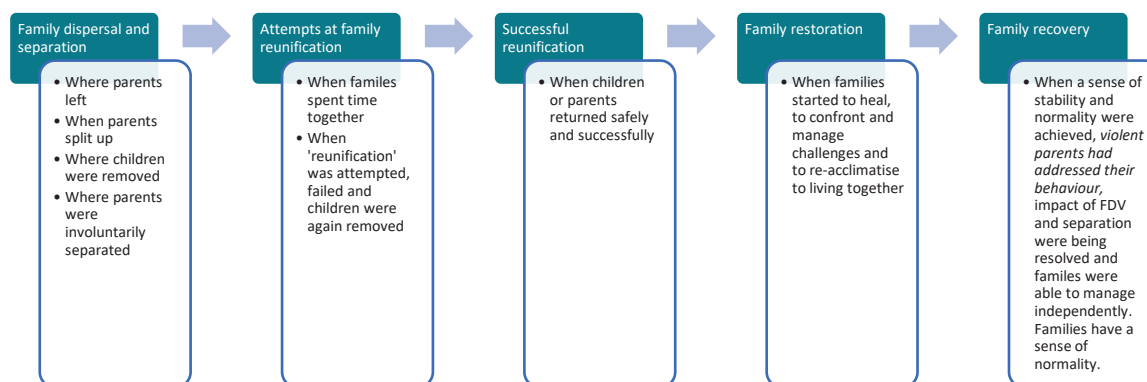As demonstrated in Section 6.1 above, the sample included families:

- Where a parent did not wish to reunify with their partner
- Who had attempted to have their child/ren returned on one or more occasions without success
- Who had one or more children returned but had others who were still in care
- Who had children who did not wish to return home, including those who were still interested in having some relationship with family members
- Where all family members returned (or at least re-connected) but were experiencing ongoing challenges that affected their stability
- Where families were stable and had begun to "recover" from the trauma of past family challenges (including FDV), were doing well and had achieved a sense of 'normality'.

Amongst this group participants did not readily identify with the term "reunification" as it did not capture their experience. They did not provide alternate terms but often differentiated points in time when families were separated, when some children were returned, when all children were returned (or at least reconnected) and when families were no longer "watched" by child protection and were "back to normality".

For some Aboriginal participants, "family" was more than the mother-father-child unit. As such, they did not always consider "separation" to have occurred when children were placed with grandparents or extended family members and did not always believe that "reunification" had occurred until the child was reunited with their extended families.

To better reflect this diversity, we suggest a series of steps to achieving what we will call "family recovery". These steps were often not linear in practice. Families often had multiple attempts at "coming back together" that failed and led to children being removed again or leaving home. For some families, "reunification" was not possible or preferred so their goal was often to restore relationships and begin to overcome the impacts of violence and time in care. However, in figure 4 we present the steps as a continuum, describing what occurs at this point in time, for ease of representation.

Figure 4 Steps towards family recovery

Family dispersal and separation	Attempts at family reunification	Successful reunification	Family restoration	Family recovery
• Where parents left • When parents split up • Where children were removed • Where parents were involuntarily separated	• When familes spent time together • When 'reunification' was attempted, failed and children were again removed	• When children or parents returned safely and successfully	• When families started to heal, to confront and manage challenges and to re-acclimatise to living together	• When a sense of stability and normality were achieved, *violent parents had addressed their behaviour,* impact of FDV and separation were being resolved and familes were able to manage independently. Families have a sense of normality.

6.1 Choosing not to reunify

Although many of the participants wanted to reunify with their families, there were cases where parents, usually mothers, and young people did not believe that this was safe or preferred. Participants often argued that it was imperative that families needed to be given individual and collective opportunities to decide what they wanted and needed after periods of separation. For some this was for the whole family to be back together, for others it was the return of children, in some cases individuals preferred to form new relationships with their families rather than living with them and in others it was severing all ties:

> One, make sure they want to do it. Two, ask them questions and make sure the persons involved in running it personally wants to get reunite. Three, in a domestic violence aspect make sure that you are definitely involved, even with the reuniting, and make sure you're there because it could still go wrong, especially if it was a – you just never know... Oh, because of past violence the relationship might be all messed and then it could impact on reuniting ones, if you know what I mean. Not all reunitings go very well. Clarification; so make sure everyone is definitely on the same page. Make sure there are no – maybe in common ground. (NON-ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F13)

Restoring relationships

Having relationships with family members, even when they were living apart, was important to many of the participants. However, some wanted some control over the nature of these relationships which sometimes changed over time:

> So yeah, reunification or whatever, back at that time would have looked like me spending equal amounts of time with both of them I guess, and having it not suck at either of them and now it would be me being able to spend time with my Mum without it sucking. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 15-18 #YW5)

Although most of the participants wished to be back with their families, a number did not believe that this was optimal:

> He hit my sister, so I never want anything to do with him again. So there's no possibility of that being sorted out. (YOUNG MAN, aged 15-18 #YM5)

> [I was in care from when I was 5 after being abused as a child. I decided to not have contact with my mother early] I said I didn't want any more [contact] when I was eight... I cut them off... And I haven't really seen her since, to be honest. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25 #3)

In some cases, mothers and young people, in particular, were clear that they did not want to have ongoing relationships with parents who used violence or had caused them harm. Separating was, as one young person put it "a step forward", so for her living with her abuser "would be going backwards". She and others did identify, however that they would be open to having contact:

> But, I am open to have, like, have sleepovers and, you know, weekends with them, those sort of things. But I don't think that I could ever really move back in with them. Especially after being so independent. (YOUNG WOMAN aged 15-18 #YW1)

> I probably wouldn't like go back to live with her because I'm 18 and I want to be independent. At this point I've had enough bullshit, but I would be comfortable to visit her then and I wouldn't feel like shit every time I stayed with her. I don't know. It would be a lot better basically... And I guess like - I don't know, it sucks but there's a point where it's just not going to happen. I mean, I accepted that it was never going to happen a while ago. (YOUNG MAN, aged 15-18 #YM5)

In some instances, they did seek for some contact with these parents but saw it an opportunity for 'closure' rather than as reunification.

> *But he will never get to the point where it's going to be okay, it's not an issue, and I will never get to the point where I will forgive him for what he's done. I don't have to. (YOUNG MAN, aged 15-18 #YM5)*

Changing the nature of relationships

Other young people talked about wanting and needing different relationships with their family members and for the relationship to be on their terms. For older young people, this was because they had 'grown up' in care and felt that it was too late to go back to way that things were before:

> *I don't want them to parent me now. I feel like it's a little bit too late, and I want to develop an adult relationship. (YOUNG WOMAN aged 15-18 #YW1)*

These young people spoke about 'boundaries' that they had put into place to protect themselves from further harm and to have some control about how, when and under what conditions they had contact. This seemed to demonstrate that they had felt empowered to manage their own relationships and had the confidence to assert themselves in new ways:

> *[I] unblocked my mum because she wasn't doing very well, and I didn't — I don't want to have sort of on my conscience, because I do love her, if she had hurt herself. So I ended up just calling her to make sure that she was okay, and then I decided, well, I'll unblock them, but I have the power now to block them if I needed to. And so one day my mum was like, "Oh, do you want to go for a coffee before school?" Like, I left, and I was like, as I was getting on the bus I was like, I don't feel like any anxiety or anything, like my body was saying, this is fine, so I decided to do it. And I mean, like, it was really good that I had told — like, I made boundaries, and I set rules, and she abided by them, which was really good.... (YOUNG WOMAN aged 15-18 #YW1)*

> *My mum and I don't have a relationship as such either, just due to the childhood stuff when she and her partners physically and emotionally abused my siblings and I and she's a pathological liar and she makes it very hard to want to be anything with her, I've tried, I keep civil, I've sent her pictures of the kids and talked to her about the grandkids and stuff like that but we don't have any conversations that revolve around my life or — it's all — I forget the terminology for it — but safe topics, it's all safe topics, so we never talk about anything that's going on in my life or all this, it's just always about the kids and how they're going, that's it. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 21-25 #7)*

Ultimately, young people and parents believed that it was important that the choice as to who and how relationships were restored was given to the children and parents who had been harmed. Parents felt that it was imperative that they talked to their children and empowered them to make these decisions.

> *That's a massive thing. If the child wants nothing to do with their partner, with the parent, there's definitely something there. That's a red flag and that could mean all sorts of things from abuse to sexual abuse, to the way they're treated by them, some violence or something, so definitely — that's a 100% a must and a priority to make sure the child actually wants to be involved, and why they don't want to be if they say no, there's something up, but yeah, definitely. (NON-ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F7)*

> *I think having an understanding of what the kids want, as well as the parents because sometimes the kids just don't want to be with one or the other. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M22)*

It is important to note that sometimes individual family members wanted relationships with some family members while others did not. This caused them some distress when these relationships were played off against each other and when their loyalties were questioned. Amongst the sample it appeared as though parents were more likely to fight to have their biological children returned

and some fathers were ambivalent or reluctant for their partners' older children to be reunified. Siblings often wanted to live with their brothers and sisters but conceded that this was not always possible. In a few cases they were upset by this ongoing conflict.

6.2 What does 'safety' mean in the context of family reunification

Young people and parents reflected on what children and young people need to be safe and feel safe, particularly during reunification. Participants spent some time considering what safety meant and what was needed for all family members to be safe and feel safe. Quite often, families suggested that although the absence of violence was vital, safety could only be achieved when parents were able to provide for their children and were equipped to meet their needs.

> *Gosh, there's so many different stages of safety. It's taken me a long time to see this. I mean, there's obviously financial safety, security in the home. There is protective, obviously security, so you've got to be able to come home to a safe home not have to worry that you're going to get hit or thrown or yelled at or worse. Safety means having good support groups and having people you can turn to and safety is perpetrator accountability. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M21)*

For families, as a group, safety was:

- **The absence of violence within families** – the violence had stopped and child protection felt confident that children could be returned, and families provided an environment where parents, children and young people could feel safe.

- **The absence (or at least the management) of other challenges** such as alcohol or other drug misuse – as AOD misuse often influenced violence and caused difficulties for the families, parents (both those who used and were the victims of violence) reported that they needed to deal with their own issues and be shielded from the temptations of using. This sometimes meant distancing themselves from peers who used drugs and in creating new relationships with those who did not use.

- **Positive interactions that were loving, caring and understanding of the needs of all family members.** Most often families talked about safety being demonstrated through their relationships with each other. Relationships that were rebuilt on trust, that prioritised children's needs for safety and care but provided parents with the support to deal with their own needs so that they could be good parents and affirmed a sense of family and belonging were vital.

> *[Being safe means having a home]... My home means security... Yeah, it's my place and it's not going anywhere and my kids are there and everyone's safe and happy and content; that's what I picture my home as so, yeah. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25 #YW7)*

- **Feeling like their parenting and their families were no longer considered 'problems'** and no longer in need of constant supervision and surveillance.

Mothers and young people recognised that mothers played a vital role in protecting their children and providing them with emotional safety.

> *Safety is us. Safety is together. I feel that I'm their safe haven and have been all the time. Even though sometimes my life's been pretty rocky and whatever else, but I make my place and their home as safe as what I possibly can, and they all know they can come straight to me. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M7)*

6.2.1 Children and young people's views on safety

For children and young people 'safety' in the context of reunification was enabled when:

- **They felt like their needs and wishes were central** to the decisions about how, when and with whom they were reunified. Across the sample, however, there were few examples of times when young people were consulted or had a say about reunification. Instead, many reported that "it just happened" and they were returned with little preparation, explanation or support. Two young people, however, reported that reunification was a gradual thing: beginning with contact, then weekend trips home and then longer stays. Having this time to reacclimatise to living at home was appreciated.

- **They had someone to talk to** about their feelings and challenges related to reunification. The importance of having an independent person who was trusted by children and young people was highlighted by young participants as well as by parents:

  To have good people, positive people around us. Just know he, he can come and talk, talk to his teachers or his day care workers, and he can come to me and talk to me if anything's going wrong in his life (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M3)

- **They experienced some stability and permanence in their living situations.** Children and young people reported that they continued to be anxious that they may be removed again. Being reassured that reunification was possible and likely was essential for some.

- **They felt that they and their siblings were a priority: for their parents and families and the services working with them.** Assurance that everyone in and working with the family placed their and their siblings needs first was needed for children and young people to believe that things would be "better this time". Having an opportunity to have their say, to share their concerns and have them resolved and to feel like they had some control seemed important to young people, particularly when they had taken on responsibilities for their parents' and siblings' care during periods of violence and separation.

- **To know that support was available if needed.** It appeared that this help was most useful when it could be provided without parental consent or knowledge and when children could expect worker confidentiality, discretion and understanding.

6.3 Barriers to family reunification

Reunification was rarely a once-off occurrence for families in the sample. Instead, many of the families recounted multiple attempts to reunify. Sometimes when one or more children were returned families struggled to provide environments that were deemed suitable by child protection which led to further removal. Reunification attempts appeared to fail when:

- **Families felt ill-prepared:** families reported that when they 'rushed' into having their children returned positive outcomes were not achieved. In particular, some parents reported that they did not always have enough confidence to re-assume their parenting roles and were ill-equipped to help their children deal with the impacts of separation.

- **Parents had not adequately dealt with their alcohol or other drug issues:** when AOD misuse was still present parents were not always able to parent their children or manage the risks of further abuse or harm. Some parents shared that they often used because it "made us happy", "helped us deal with our [problems]" and because of their addictions. Three of the families reported that they continued to use after their children were returned which led to failed reunification:

No, half the time [drugs] will make it worse, because you've just had [your kids] taken away from you because of that and it makes you feel down so you do it even more, because you think "that that's the only thing that's made you happy for so long", or "your children that have made you happy, they're gone now" so you're going to do the last thing that you know that makes you happy. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #14)

- **Home environments were unstable:** although some families had secured what they believed was stable accommodation, this was not always the case.

- **Parental re-partnering:** was an issue for several families where parents either chose to have previously violent partners return home or to establish new relationships that turned violent.

- **Minimal support from partners:** this limited parents' ability to provide for their children and to demonstrate that both were in a position to adequately care for their children:

    It's either he has to try more or he will have to go because I don't want to have to choose leaving the case with [child protection] open if he's not gonna want to change and go forward with things and I want the case closed eventually and I want the girls to be home and not have that in the back of my head that [child protection] are always going to be there.... he's a great dad and he is fine with the girls, but I don't think that he realises that he is and then it also makes it harder when [child protection] say to him, "you know, you need to do this" and he goes, "well, no, just because you're telling me to stop doing that, I'm gonna do it even more". I don't think they'll let the girls come back until he changes, and I think it will take time for him to. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #14)

- **Turnover in child protection staff:** some families reported that after reunification they were provided new staff who did not fully appreciate their family's experience or needs and had different expectations of what was required for families to demonstrate their ongoing ability to care for their children:

    I'm on my fifth - I'm on my fifth case worker in less than 12 months. He's on his second or third worker for one on one. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M8)

6.4 What helps enable successful family reunification?

Parents and young people reflected on positive and successful reunification. Overwhelmingly, they believed that safety was essential and needed to underpin their attempts to reunify. In addition, they believed that reunification was enhanced when they were able to provide their children safe and stable accommodation, when they had financial security and were surrounded by formal and informal supports that helped them be the best parents that they could be, which included assistance in managing the challenges that inevitably emerged when children were returned:

    In my eyes, yes, it wasn't easy when they came back. It was a massive weight off my shoulder, being reunified with my children, like, knowing that I didn't have to take them home at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Massive weight. Knowing that they were safe, knowing that they were going to go to school, knowing that they were going to go somewhere. All these little things, it was, like, a party in my own head, I guess. It was, like, yes. But then, as exciting as it was for me, I also knew how hard it was going to be, because I had to build up the trust, I had to show them that they were going to be safe, I had to show them that it was the best option, and it was not easy. Screaming, suspensions, learning centres, stabbings, it's like – but I wouldn't have it any other way because I've got them all back together. Having them all back together after being separated because of domestic violence and all of that, it's a huge weight lifted off my shoulders, but it's not easy [laughs]. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M6)

Parents and families highlighted some factors that supported their positive reunification, including:

- **Secure stable accommodation:** which was adequate and appropriate for children and young people, had enough space for all family members to have time for themselves, that was situated in neighbourhoods and communities free from threats such as violence, drug problems and conflict:

    For me, like it's physical and well, physical, structurally and emotionally. Structurally being a stable, secure house that, I suppose that is sort of familiar for the kids, so they feel comfortable, they feel stable, and I suppose with those things, emotional comes into it, if they're feeling comfortable and stable in the house. Environment, like as in area. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M22)

- **Financial security:** was also imperative as families recounted that financial stress placed great strain on relationships and restricted their families from meeting children's needs:

    It all comes down to money. If you don't have it you can't provide for your kids and you get all stressed out and that's when things go downhill again (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M8)

    Finances need to be to the point where you can feed them, or this is where support comes into it, if you can get – if these people can get be supported because pretty much food and accommodation, food and house is a stability that everybody needs. You know, you need to be able to get up in the morning and feed your kids breakfast, give them lunch, have tea ready for them when they come home. And so I've just found that a lot of families just scrape through, you know, with the minimum, so, help from some organisation would be really good with food. (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F6)

- **Formal and informal support networks**: were helpful for families who recognised that often they had lost contact with friends and family and missed the reassurance, practical assistance and peers who "called them out" when mistakes were made and "celebrate you" when successes were achieved.

Families recounted supports and services that assisted them through their reunification. They most often appreciated support that included:

- **Preparation**– was valued by parents who felt that they need to have enough time to ensure that they were emotionally ready to have their children home and skilled up to meet their children's needs. Parents who had had multiple attempts at reunification reflected that in earlier attempts they had 'rushed into' reunification and that problems ensued. Families reported that they did better when they had:

    o **Regular contact** that was phased and allowed families to meet their children in normalised environments. After supervised meetings with children at community organisations, families were keen to see their children in places like parks where they could interact with their sons and daughters, enjoy time together and relate to their children naturally. Weekend and day visits home which gradually extended to longer stays helped parents and children re-acclimatise. Support that was affirming and helped parents build and demonstrate their parenting skills were considered vital.

    o **Good planning** which included providing parents and children with detail about how reunification might occur and allowing them to have their say about when and how they might return was seen as beneficial. Families were frustrated when these plans changed so believed that it was imperative that child protection were transparent and helped them understand why plans were modified.

- o **Whole-of-family support** appeared to help facilitate positive reunification. When one parent was ready to reunite and another was less prepared or committed outcomes tended to be restricted. Similarly, when children and young people were not afforded a say or opportunities to raise and have their needs and wishes met problems often emerged.

- **Support to be a good parent** – was identified as essential. Many felt that they had either always found parenting difficult (because they had limited experience to draw from and because violence restricted their ability to be available to their children) or that their confidence, skills and capacity had been affected during periods of separation. They reported that they needed help and spoke about the value they placed on parenting programs that helped them better understand their needs, the impacts of exposure to or victimisation during violent periods, and how their children experienced separation:
  - o **Family support** was often raised as an essential ingredient in positive reunification. Having a worker who was knowledgeable, skilful and able to both encourage and challenge parents were valued by families who reflected that having someone that could quickly respond to emerging issues and who empowered families to find collaborative solutions were of great value.
  - o **Parenting education programs** were greatly appreciated by parents where they learned more about how violence affects the developing child, parent-child attachment and how to strengthen bonds, and non-punitive approaches to managing children's trauma-based behaviours and were all considered essential.
  - o **Peer support and mentoring** was enjoyed by parents who liked the opportunity to meet and learn from other families who had encountered and dealt with similar challenges to themselves and could provide grounded strategies that had worked for them:

[You need someone] who's a good parent and can give you advice if you're stuck on something if you don't know how to change a nappy and just let them walk around naked – no. Yes, someone that can just give you advice if you're angry at the kid because – not to be mean to babies but say the baby is not shutting up and you're getting aggressive like men and dads do a little bit, you could just call up and you're, like, "Man, look, I tried everything. I've given the – her or him the bottle; what do I do, man, I'm freaking out?" And they could just be, like, "Hey, man, if it's not too late take him or her for a walk, sing a song, put some music on." It might try and ease me - go take a quick breather but not far away from the kid so you will keep an eye on him or her... I would have counsellors in there too for that and for just dads, like dad counsellors or men's groups as well so you can talk to dads and learn, get the experience. (NON-ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F13)

Parents reported that supports were particularly valuable when those providing assistance had an appreciation of the nature and impacts of FDV and were able to give them good advice. In a few cases, family mediation helped parents re-connect with their children and resolve the tensions that existed within family relationships.

- **Culturally appropriate support –** was valued by Aboriginal parents who believed that Aboriginal community controlled services were more likely to appreciate their circumstances, be more aware of family's challenges, appreciate how to help resolve tensions within families and communities and help their children remain connected to their culture and community during periods of separation.

Services and supports were cherished when provided in ways that were:
- Optimistic about parents' capacity and the family's future prospects

- Non-stigmatising and were more about reassurance and practical support rather than surveillance or perceived punishment
- Provided by staff who had been working with families through separation, had demonstrated that they were trustworthy and had built relationships with all family members, who showed "tough love" and would "call out" problems as they emerged and were able to strengthen families internally and their links to supports, services and communities
- Could both help to solve family's problems but also work with them to become self-sufficient and confident in finding solutions
- Patient and persistent and recognised that families would make mistakes, would falter and would find it difficult to deal with enduring problems and challenges that existed for many years.

Families who were successfully reunifying often identified a key worker who had been with them for some time and who had been there through significant hardship. Parents reported that they often tested these workers to see whether they were truly there for them and spoke in glowing terms about the value that these workers brought to their lives.

6.5 Summary

In this section we explored the nature and experience of reunification after separation due to statutory engagement or when a parent or young person returned home. Recognising that many families did not see reunification as an endpoint but instead the point at which one or more children were returned, we discuss it as another step towards 'recovery': the point at which families were able to recover from periods of violence and separation, were able to reacclimatise and enjoy their time together. This will be further discussed in Section 7.

Not all participants wanted to be reunified with all or some members of the family. In some instances, it was not deemed safe or preferable to re-form relationships with family members who used violence. In other situations, young people and parents were happy to create new relationships that were on their own terms and often allowed them to make decisions about when, how and in what ways they would have an ongoing relationship.

Some young people reported that they had grown out of their relationships with their parents and families and wanted to live separately. Again, some chose to seek out new relationships while others chose to remain unconnected. Most argued strongly that it needed to be their choice and encouraged workers and the service system to be respectful of this desire.

For families that were reunifying, safety entailed the absence of the risk of violence and support to deal with underlying issues and tensions (such as childhood trauma and loss), pressing concerns (such as drug addictions) and impacts of exposure to violence. Periods of separation were often considered to be traumatic and had an impact on parents' and young people's emotional wellbeing, their relationships and their trust in others. Sometimes children and young people would demonstrate these impacts through their behaviours – and parents sometimes needed support to understand and respond in caring and effective ways.

For reunification to be successful, parents needed to feel affirmed, to have the skills and knowledge and access to formal and informal supports. Assistance that was non-judgmental, empowering and patient was valued as was that which was culturally appropriate (when applicable).

Similarly, young people needed to feel as though their needs and safety were a priority, that their views and wishes were heard and acted upon and for assistance to be available if they needed to talk about their experiences, thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, they wanted to be safe and feel safe and to know that they, their siblings and mothers were not going to be harmed.

7. FAMILY RECOVERY

Families often recalled that although the system tended to see the return of their children as the ultimate goal of reunification, they believed that this was just the first step towards 'recovery'. After families were reunited, they wanted and needed to restore their sense of family, to overcome the often-unrecognised impacts of violence and separation and create environments that were stable and family-life that was 'normal'.

In this section we provide an overview of the things parents and young people wanted for their families and what facilitated and restricted the family's goals being achieved.

7.1 Restoring sense of family, positive parenting and parental pride

As discussed in Section 6, reunification was often an elongated and challenging experience for families. Parents and young people reported that it was only when all family members who were willing or able to return home did so that the family could restore and re-define itself.

One young person observed that for at least ten years, her family was seen and experienced as a "violent family" with "neglected kids" who had spent more time apart than together. For her, having a family that was together, stable and where parents and children cared for and relied on each other was imperative.

Mothers and fathers also reported that their identities as parents were battered during periods of violence and separation. They reported feeling shame, feeling as they were failures, being judged as neglectful or abusive and unable to parent their children during periods of separation. This reduced their confidence and parents reported "second guessing" themselves after their children were returned. These challenges were compounded for parents whose children had grown and changed while separated. They reported feeling "out of their depth" when they discovered that the parenting strategies that they had used in the past were no longer working:

> *The kids, because I need to know that I have, everything that I wanted to instil in them. The way I try to explain it to anyone because you can't explain it, really, but the best example I've got is it's like you've been doing your job for so many years and I in particular have been doing mine for 16 at that time, everyday full time, and I felt very competent in my job and my abilities, and one day someone came along and said no, I'm sorry but you're no longer good enough and we're going to take you from your position and you're taken out of that position for two years, but in that two year period, all this still changes, whether it be the computers or the knowledge that you need or anything, because they literally changed my children and everything I instilled in them, so I had them coming home saying to me, "I want my mum back." And I'm saying, thinking, "I want my kids back." But yeah, it's like someone taking you out of your job and throwing you straight back in it 24 hours with no support, no guidance and just saying, right, all the computer work is different, everything has changed but just get straight back into it. And that's the best way I can explain how I feel. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M5)*

They wanted help to be 'good parents' who were able to effectively care for their children and provide parental relationships that were built on trust, love and positive discipline. This was more a challenge then some parents had imagined. They reported that during separation they and their children had changed as had the nature of their relationships. To be 'good parents' participants suggested that they needed to:

- Provide children space and allow them to recover from their experiences in care
- Be patient, understanding and appreciate that it would take time to re-establish relationships that had been severed or strained
- Place the needs of children above their own and to be ever-vigilant to their children's needs and wishes

- Understand that they might not always be 'perfect' and be supported when they made mistakes or found it difficult to find solutions.

Mothers were often proud of their efforts in fighting for the children against a system that they experienced as hostile and disempowering. They did not often believe that their child protection workers were appreciative of these efforts, of their determination and resilience or how easy it might have been for them to "give up":

> *My mum never fighted for me. My mum left us when I was seven years old…. [Child protection should] tell you to your face, like, she's doing a very good job. I can see she's a very protective mum. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M9)*

7.2 Understanding and managing the enduring impacts of violence and separation to support recovery

Throughout this report we have identified many of the impacts of the violence experienced by parents and children. In Table 2, we provide examples of how these impacts have endured and influenced family's experiences post-reunification.

> *It has left some effects on my family, it's not something that as soon as we were given back to my mum, our custody, it's not just going to fix everything and that's why the counselling and stuff I feel like it was really important for them to try and get us that kind of support, which they didn't. (YOUNG WOMAN, AGED 19-25 #5)*

Table 2 Enduring impacts of FDV

For Parents	For young people	For families
Feelings of guilt, shame and failure as a parent were enduring and influenced parent's confidence and their capacity to parent as they second-guessed themselves.	Emotional impacts were also enduring for many of the young people. Some talked about constantly experiencing dis-ease, being hypervigilant to risks and enduring feelings of sadness and concern.	Resilience was evident in the lives of many of the young people and families. Providing opportunities for young people and families to reflect on their survival, coping and ability to overcome significant challenges was valued.
Physical impacts or injury caused difficulty for a number of the parents who were trying to manage chronic pain and neurological issues. These parents reported that sometimes they were unable to get out of bed or needed to go to the hospital for treatment. This sometimes restricted them from being able to look after their children and caused undue stress.	Education was not always positively experienced by young people who needed assistance to return to school or to find alternate educational opportunities. Some young people reported great satisfaction in going to TAFE where they were able to achieve and, sometimes for the first time, feel proud of their efforts.	Ongoing conflict was an issue for families who were sometimes ill-prepared for unresolved issues to re-emerge post-reunification. Some parents who had gone through multiple attempts at reunification reported that understanding that their children's latent issues would sometimes lead to "acting-out" or other problematic behaviours was essential and needed to underpin how they related to their children.
Emotional impacts were often unresolved and were compounded during periods of separation. Parents reported overwhelming feelings of anxiety and panic that they needed to manage post-reunification.	Lack of confidence and unresolved problems in their relationships with parents began during periods of violence and were often exacerbated during periods of separation. Having opportunities to restore their confidence in their parents and to see how their parents had changed were important for young people as were opportunities for them to express how their experiences had affected them. None of the young people reported receiving family mediation or support in re-forming relationships with parents.	A lack of trust in others made forming new, positive relationships difficult and seeking support challenging. A few of the mothers felt that it would be helpful if their new protective partners were helped to understand their ongoing trust issues and how this manifested in their relationships. An inability to rely on partners, to raise personal concerns and to manage conflicts were all identified as enduring impacts
		Isolation was an ongoing issue for some families who needed help to develop informal support networks and to reconcile relationships with friends and family.

In Table 3, we provide insights as to how the impacts of separation have an impact post-reunification.

Table 3 Enduring impacts of separation

For Parents	For young people	For families
Motivation to make change continued and was replaced by a motivation to sustain their children and provide safe environments and relationships to ensure that they could stay at home.	**Emotional impacts** of FDV were exacerbated during periods of time in care with the additional impacts of being exposed to further abuse and violence and feelings of fear and concern for others. Some young people reported that they were being treated for PTSD and needed ongoing help to resolve their mental health issues. Self-harming behaviours sometimes continued: young people needed help to manage these coping strategies.	**Family identities** were often strained during periods of violence. Some children who were removed during infancy had never lived with their parents so needed to assistance to form trusting relationships and acclimatise to their new home environments.
Enduring safety concerns were still present for mothers who were reunified with their children but not their abusive partners. Having court orders and strategies to keep these violent partners away was essential for many.	**Relationships with parents** were also affected with some young people reporting that they or their younger siblings held their parents responsible for their time in care and for the negative experiences they encountered. One argued that she needed an opportunity to express these feelings and seek resolution.	
Fears for their children were often reduced post-reunification but it was evident that some parents continued to be constantly fearful for their children's safety.	**Lack of trust in caring professionals** was exacerbated for many during periods of separation. Some reported that they would never trust workers again while others, who had positive experiences, shared that their confidence was growing.	
Relationships with children continued to be strained and parents reported needing formal and informal help to assist them to reconcile. Providing information to children as to why they were removed and how parents had worked hard to have them returned was valued by many. Additional support was required for children with poor attachment.	**Caring responsibilities** for parents and siblings often reduced but often continued. Some young people talked about this with some pride, seeing their care for others as a personal strength. Others demonstrated ongoing concern for their parents and siblings and reported providing assistance, particularly when parents were still upset and their siblings were finding it difficult to re-adjust.	
Parents' identities were also affected during periods of separation and compounded the effects of FDV. Again, parents valued an opportunity to reflect on how they had been a good parent during periods of FDV and separation.		

It was important for parents to appreciate how periods of violence and separation affected their children and for them to be responsive to these when relating to and parenting their children post-separation. Some parents had been told about what to expect while others were confronted by the impacts when their children returned home:

> *I know that my son's going to be a little fragile due to what he went through with his mum. I know he'll feel safe with me. He's never had a reason not to feel safe. I can go — bad as it sounds, I hate saying it, I can go a year without seeing him, spend 10 minutes with him, and it's like I've never — he never left. (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F2)*

Parents who had been reunified argued that this took time and that parents needed to be patient, to allow their children to overcome trust issues and re-establish positive bonds:

> *Talking to all the kids and allowing them to express it as well, not punishing them for misbehaving or acting out or being angry. Let them have their own little space. Once they've calmed down, then I would talk to them. I didn't punish them for getting angry or frustrated or anything, even through the reunification. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M4)*

> *Pretty much, the only advice I could really give would be to take your time, don't rush it, don't expect miracles to happen. And, yeah, just take your time with it, really. That's pretty much the advice I could give to parents that are in that same boat. Because when — I've seen what happens when the parents try to rush and try to make up for the time that I'd missed, and it just ends up turning the child away, because, yeah, they want the attention, but they are getting too much. And they are kind of used to not getting much attention. So, it conflicts on them as well. But we don't realise that, because we're just happy to see them. (ABORIGINAL FATHER, #F2)*

Families often recognised that they had many challenges to overcome and needed support from a wide range of professionals to be able to grow through the adversity they experienced. In some circumstances, families spoke an individual worker who worked with them in a variety of ways: providing material assistance, providing parenting guidance and support and helping them to access other supports. Others spoke about having a myriad of organisations and workers involved in their lives which, although chaotic, were helping them to manage their difficulties:

> *I feel like I'm going crazy, because of [how many people are involved], but I'm doing very well. It's just like, because I'm actually dealing with it all, like not just band-aiding it, yeah. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M10)*

7.3 Children and young people 'doing well'

Parents felt that their ordeals were finally over when their children were relaxed, comfortable and in a position to 'do well'. For some parents this included their children attending and achieving at school, for others it was them making friends, and for others it was about their children being happy and healthy:

> *[For our oldest it] has been a rocky ride, like, last month she's been a bit off too but, oh, generally the progress she's made, she's my big mover and shaker this year with school and getting a job. We've got her booked in and she's been accepted to TAFE next year (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M1)*

> *I guess, now the good thing about the family is that we want to have a happy life. We want to be happy. I want my kids to be happy. That's the main goal I think for our life at the moment. And just not going back to the way we were, kind of thing. Do you know what I mean? And just keeping them safe (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M3)*

Parents who had their children returned were often excited to see how their children were now more relaxed, comfortable and confident and pointed to these behaviours as a demonstration that they were now safe and the family was recovering:

They're more outspoken, they're more comfortable with me, even if they're laughing or crying or playing or fighting, anything, they're more them, they've got personalities, it's enjoying my home and us. Like, all of them have just grown and I never knew that they were going through that, because I didn't think that they weren't growing and, yeah. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M1O)

Parents recognised that for their children to 'do well' they also needed to be supported to deal with their adverse experiences. A number of the mothers in the sample talked about how during periods of violence and separation they were not always able to reflect on their children's needs or, because their key priority was to keep their children physically safe, to support their emotional safety. These mothers reflected that they enjoyed the opportunity, now that their children were returned, to be able to provide attention to these tasks:

It's better for them, it is, at least they know that, like I'm there with them now. Like beforehand, I would just pretend that it wasn't happening, or I'd block their feelings, I didn't even notice their feelings really at the end of the day. So, it really was just shrugging them off, like they didn't have emotions, like now, I'm letting them have it. It's hard on days, but it's probably better for us, yeah, actually it is very hard for us, but it's good, because it's coming out and we're sharing it and yeah. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M1O)

7.4 Achieving 'normality'

When asked how they could tell that reunification was successful, many of the participants talked about 'normality': that their families did normal things together, that their relationships were ones usual of other families, that the challenges they experienced were not extreme and just "stuff you'd expect in any family".

In one family, parents and children shared that they enjoyed going to the motocross together. Children were pleased that their parents were on the sidelines cheering on and parents were delighted that they could do fun things with their children. The daughter in this family reported that it had been at least 5 years since the family had gone to the track together because her parents were using drugs and because she had been separated while her parents "got clean". Spending time together doing something from her childhood was greatly valued and demonstrated that "things are good now".

In other families, 'normal' activities and 'normal interactions' took different forms. For some it was reinstating family traditions like birthday parties or celebrations while in others it was doing day to day tasks like cooking and eating together:

It's been challenging. It's been rewarding, but it's been challenging. But it's been awesome because, just being able to cook them meals and they eat it. My little boy he would not eat vegetables, no meat. She would eat pizza pockets, pizza subs, maybe a bit of bacon. Sometimes cooked pasta packets. When I was babysitting, I had spaghetti bog there – they never – they started eating spaghetti bog. The carers, they'd eat salad, cooked chicken, meat vegetables, so now it's just absolutely amazing. And I can just cook them, mashed potato, carrots, broccoli, cauliflower, any kind of vegetable, even salad sandwiches, and they'll eat it. Even if they don't want to, like, you have to eat your salad. I made it for you, now you're going to eat it. And they do. And it's just amazing. It makes me so proud to see that they're actually doing it. I'm not a really good cook, but I'm getting better at it because the kids will eat the vegetables now and that's really thanks to the carers... It's a delight for me to be able to do something as simple as cooking and it reminds me that my children are finally home. (ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M3)

7.5 What helps family recovery?

Participants identified a number of things that they believed helped them recover, including support to help children make meaning of their experiences of violence and separation; assistance to deal with re-emerging difficulties, counselling and family mediation to assist families heal past conflicts, and reassurance for parents that they can provide for their children. Informal "check-ins" by child protection or others were also encouraged by some.

Support for children that helps them understand their experiences of violence and separation

A number of parents reported being unsure as to how exposure to violence, abuse and separation had affected their children and whether their children understood why they had been removed. Although it appeared to be scary for some parents, participants felt that it was important for children to be given an opportunity to talk about and be supported to deal with the effects of violence and separation. Young people often came to the same conclusion: recalling that during periods of separation they were often confused about why they had been removed and, in a small number of cases, misapportioned blame towards their mothers. They felt that it was vital that someone (be it a worker or otherwise) who they trusted kept them informed and was available to answer questions that they had.

Young people who had been harmed or neglected by their parents also felt that it was important for an independent and trustworthy 'outsider' (be it a worker, an extended family member or counsellor) to assure them that their parents were now safe people and that they were now in a position to better care for them. They also felt that it was important for such allies to "check in" to make sure that things had improved and the children's needs were being met:

> *Yeah, especially if there's kids that have been taken away and are coming back to their parent and the parents made all these changes and they've turned their lives around and they're going to be good people now, those kids that were taken away don't know that, and they're just going from being taken away and they don't understand when they're being taken away, and then they spend all this time apart and then they come back and they're expecting life to be the same, and it might be better which is great but they're still expecting the worst things to happen, because that's what they're used to. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25, #YW7)*

Help with issues that resurfaced

A number of the young people talked about coping during periods of violence and separation and reported that once they were reunified with their families, they had overcome the emotional impacts. However, a few talked about how, when things were stable and they were "getting on" with life they experienced emotional difficulty, for others issues remained unresolved but had ongoing impacts:

> *it took my life to fall apart as an adult for me to know what the hell happened to me as a child, for me to understand why I am the way I am regarding a lot of things. (YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25 #YW7)*

Those who had been in care felt that child protection should be responsible for finding them assistance if the trauma causing their difficulties related to their experiences out of home:

I went through a major breakup and there was just so many unresolved feelings, right, and so I went to my GP and I was, like, "Look, I just need to, look, I'm not feeling well, I need to talk to someone and I just think my mental health is not doing really great, I know that these mental health plans — what's the deal with that?" And she was, like, "Okay, talk to me about what's going on." So I started on the topic of the breakup and then inside of 15, 20 minutes there was unresolved issues of all of this [abuse in care], right, and she was, like, "Yeah, okay, there's a lot more than just a breakup going on here," so she asked if I had ever been involved with any form of Protective Services, I was, like, "Yeah," this, this, this, she's, like, "Okay, contact them because there's a limitation, right, on how old you can be but you can still access their services." And I was, like, "Okay, sure, no problem." So she was, like, "You might be able — you might be eligible for free counselling around — specifically around that, right, and if their department has dealt with your situation they're going to have a better understanding and a better — they're probably going to have a better approach to actually helping you deal with this than if you just go to a new psychologist that doesn't really have any experience and you try and recap 10 years of trauma in 40 minutes." Right, she's, like, "At least they'll have case files and they'll be able to go over everything and be a little bit more well informed." And I was, like, "Okay, sure, that makes sense to me." And so I contacted them and, yeah, I was — effectively it was the same, like, "You're not our problem anymore, you're an adult, no, it doesn't work like that." I'm, like, "Wow, okay, cool, no problem, thanks for nothing." (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1+)

Parents often reported being ill-equipped to help their children talk about their experiences and to help them cope with the ongoing challenges. This was particularly the case for mothers who were caring for additional children who each had their own personal needs and trauma-related difficulties that emerged at different times. These mothers advocated for assertive trauma-centred psychological support for her children and coaching on how to help them heal:

Five years [after my children were returned] I'm still trying to rebuild the bonds that have been broken with these children, or whose trauma is worse, or who's been affected worse, like they're just all criticising each other, with the way they cope with different things and just, you know, one might be excelling while the other one is deteriorating and they take turns, and it's just — they don't even know how to verbalise it. you know you've got nobody else [to help your children] … They couldn't be more loving, beautiful children, I couldn't say more about them, but the trauma has definitely had its affect, like anger wise, anxiety wise… [it's impacted them all]… and I don't know how to help them half the time (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M5)

Some parents reported having some help caring for children displaying trauma-based behaviours but most reported that they received no help. They thought that this assistance should be mandatorily provided, particularly when they related to periods of separation:

With - there's a place here [that helps], you know, parenting kids with trauma-based behaviour. If I didn't do that I wouldn't have even, well I've got no hair, but I would have been bald by now. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #17)

Counselling for all family members and someone to talk with
As discussed in previous sections, parents and young people expressed both an interest in having someone to talk to and receiving counselling to deal with their issues but also a reluctance to engage. One young man shared his experiences, the impacts of his traumatic experiences in her family and how these influenced her behaviours and lack of trust:

So I'm okay, I think I've just become — which is probably very not really not healthy at all — just so incredibly desensitised to it, that it does get to me but I think I've, I don't know, accepted it but it's just that's what happened and it's somewhere sitting in there and that's fine and I don't need to poke a sleeping bear, I'm aware of the damage that it's had on me, I'm aware of that I am — I have these personality traits that make me really aware of people and I know that I've got this anxiety over flight or fight and loud noises and I know that I suck at relationships but I don't need — I've moved away from the fact of blaming that circumstance, I know that that's had a huge impact on it but constantly dwelling on it is not going to fix the problem, I need to work on myself. And so I've been — and so that's something that I've been doing a lot on in the last couple of years, the last three or four years, so whilst I'm okay talking about it, it's, like, it's just there, it's just the — it's just the weird sound my car engine makes, it's just — it hasn't blown up yet so... I think, yes, it has influenced where I am now but I don't think that it has to shape my future either because I'm aware of the damage that it's done and if I focus on the damage rather than the circumstance then I still think that's a healthy way for me at least to be processing the information. (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+ #YP1+)

Other mothers reported that they hoped their children would seek out counselling or support but recalled that it often took young people some time to be ready to talk about their experiences and feelings:

At the minute [my daughter's] sort of going through the whole mental health side of stuff with anxieties and I do say to her that a lot of this comes from way back then. You need to actually face reality and go and speak to someone and let everything out and then maybe you can see the picture. But I can't make up her mind for her. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M8)

Coaching and reassurance

As noted above, many of the parents had engaged in parenting education programs prior to having their children returned. It was evident that many of the parents were utilising the knowledge and strategies that they had learned, however many felt that ongoing assistance would be helpful for them to implement the lessons day-to-day.

Six families were involved in a family mentoring program and reported the value of having regular meetings with a coach or mentor with lived experience of family violence, child protection involvement or managing similar issues and challenges. Getting hands-on advice, being provided feedback on their parenting decisions and being reassured about their progress were considered invaluable by those involved:

Yep, and we just sit around the back table and we discuss about what's going on, what's happened, and then why has it happened and if we're in a bit of a sticky state, situation how can you give some lines to take what — some ideas... Yeah, but we don't want the answers, we want — normally we've got some ideas but we're not sure, what does — just to have a second opinion on which way to go. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M1)

But the girls here, you can talk about everything and anything, and they've got supports or they will send you to where you need to go. They will link you up to another service; they will link you to people that they know will suit what you're looking for. Which is great... It's just a matter of, like I say, I believe myself it should be people that have actually been through it. Because you can't get what people have been through if you've not been there. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M7)

Similarly, some families had received assistance from family support programs. They valued these supports but were unhappy that these supports either ended when their children were returned or a few months later. A number of parents reported that things were fairly settled for a few weeks after reunification and it wasn't until the family felt stable that some of the issues and impacts re-emerged. Having enduring, available support was sought, preferably by the same

staff who were involved with the family during periods of separation who prepared and assisted them through reunification.

Child protection involvement
Although parents reported that they were often pleased that they no longer had statutory intervention they were surprised that workers had not rung to "check in" and make sure that they were succeeding or, as importantly, to ensure that they were getting assistance to manage any unanticipated challenges or hurdles:

> *No. Not once. So it was really kind of surprising. There was no three months check up. There was no six month check up to see whether reunification worked, whether there was any issue. I could be living in squalor really now for all they knew. They wouldn't have a clue. So there needs to be more [supports] like [my worker] I think that would actually help a hell of a lot and they need to overhaul their training for their staff, because that woman who worked for [child protection] in reunification shouldn't be there with what she said. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M4)*

> *If it all goes really well and reunification and it's going really well and there's no violence and everything. Well, you just slowly start stepping back, not just drop off the face of the earth like that, because that's when things – you know, because the abuser could be making it, like, knowing that there eventually going to fade out. Well, we can keep this up for, you know, but eventually they're going to – they'll cave, and they'll end up forcing it back into the same routine that they were in and everything. So, on that instance, if everything is going all right, you just slowly fade out as opposed to just dropping out. But if it's a real concern family, you don't drop out at all. You make sure that you've got [child protection] on board, so they can link in with services through them as well. Parenting programs, family ones that they can do parent ones, that they can do just the parents themselves. Counselling for the mother and the father, counselling for the family, but if it gets to a point where, like, the abuser starts again, get them out. (NON-ABORIGINAL MOTHER, #M6)*

7.6 Summary

For many families, reunification was a hurdle which they had to overcome to have their children returned, for their families to reform and to recover from extended periods of violence and separation. The majority of families reported that the period after reunification was incredibly challenging as children and young people, in particular, dealt with re-emerging impacts of violence and their time away and parents had to re-establish and in some instances form bonds with their children. During this fragile time, families had varying degrees of support but valued opportunities to meet with others, to be guided by skilled professionals and to be mentored as they implemented their newly developed parenting strategies.

Success was achieved when families were living and relating safely, when parents who used violence had addressed their behaviour and stopped the violence, when parents and young people were managing the impacts of violence and separation and when a sense of 'normality' was sustained.

8. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Families who experience family and domestic violence are some of the most vulnerable members of our community (Chung, 2015; Humphreys, 2007). Many of the mothers and young people in our study recalled how they had sustained serious injuries, experienced significant trauma and lived with danger, fear and anxiety on a daily basis. What these families most needed was for the violence to end or assistance to escape violent partners and homes, and to find new environments where they could recover and live safely. However, many families experienced great challenges and often experienced interventions that they believed compromised rather than fostered safety and limited their capacity to recover. Coupled with the impacts of exposure to violence, mothers and young people often spoke about new risks and traumas that made successful reunification and recovery near impossible.

Families that had positive interactions with child protection, family support services and family and domestic violence agencies reported that during periods of separation they were able to strengthen their relationships with their children, make positive changes, overcome difficulties and manage the ongoing challenges and impacts that they encountered. However, others were met with workers, systems and structures that were disempowering and presented barriers that had detrimental impacts and impeded the ways that they related, protected and provided for each other.

Families valued responses that were appreciative of the impacts of violence, the difficult choices families made, the compromises they were forced to take and their needs during the separation-reunification journey. They sought assistance that was empowering, respectful, non-judgmental, and collaborative. Parents and young people spoke about the centrality of safety and the need to recognise that some interventions and responses to families escaping violence compromised safety and placed family members in environments that sustained rather than reduced their feelings of unease and insecurity.

In this section, we provide an overview of key research questions and findings before considering the implications of the study and the opportunities for further research.

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

8.1 Understanding safety in the context of reunification after violence

Participants in this study understood and experienced safety in different ways across the reunification-recovery journey. However, overwhelmingly, parents and young people often conceptualised safety as being the absence of violence and a state in which they were not afraid or concerned about their and their family's security. Young people often spoke about safety as:

- Being with members of their families who were loving, caring and protective;
- Feeling assured that family challenges were being managed and that the capacity of parents to provide protection, comfort and support were not being compromised;
- "Visibility", where family members are visible to each other and to services that were there to respond to family needs and those of each family member and to the broader community. Participants emphasised how important it was that their needs were recognised, their

strengths appreciated, their voices heard and they were seen with respect, with appreciation of their circumstances. Some also said that it was important to be treated as families with needs rather than perpetrators or victims and as survivors rather than just families who warranted judgment or control; and

- Feeling that they are surrounded by protective adults who would not cause them harm but encourage, challenge and mediate to ensure that family strengths and protective strategies were fostered.

Mothers also spoke about safety in terms of:

- Having confidence that they and their children were safe;
- Being acknowledged as parents who have actively protected and cared for their children, and not being held responsible for the violent behaviours of their partners; and
- Feeling empowered to make decisions that were in their and their family's best interests and were assisted when help was needed to make small or drastic changes to their circumstances.

Fathers tended to speak about safety as it related to:

- The absence of stressors that influenced their behaviours, including their own past and present problems (such as child maltreatment, relationship difficulties and conflicts) and challenges (such as financial stresses, alcohol or other drug problems);
- Living in stable and secure accommodation within communities that were not violent or risky in ways that presented challenges and impediments a positive family life; and
- Recognition of their value as parents and the efforts that they had invested to come up with new ways of parenting and relating with their partners.

For many mothers and young people, safety was described as lived and embodied, that is, safety was experienced in their bodies, in their interactions with other family members, and in their sense of place in the world. When young people, felt safe they characterised parents as calm, relaxed, able to deal with emotions and positively relate to one another. For both mothers and young people, safety had been achieved when parents were confident and equipped to care for their children and when all family members were happy and healthy, when they were no longer isolated or estranged from friends and extended families and when things felt "normal".

The majority of families recalled that safety was particularly absent for families during periods of violence, but that it was also not often experienced during periods of separation or fully experienced after reunification. As one young woman recalled, "*from the age of five until [my recent 16th birthday] I was never safe*".

Given that connection with family members was central to young people's experiences of safety, being removed or living away from protective parents (usually mothers) and siblings was traumatic and, in many cases, compounded or exacerbated their sense of insecurity. The fears and concerns of mothers and young people for their families were heightened during separation because they were no longer able to protect each other, comfort each other or help manage risks and the impact of violence, such as trauma; this, in turn, could reinforce a sense of disempowerment, and feelings of guilt and shame, with mothers particularly often feeling neglectful in their responsibilities towards their children.

In our study, parents, again usually mothers, who felt undermined, judged and restricted in their parenting roles also characterised their interactions with child protection and other services as limiting rather than improving their sense of safety. This was particularly in relation to their need

to have autonomy and a sense of empowerment, and to be able to directly care for and protect their children. New challenges also often arose for some children and young people during periods of separation (such as sexual abuse and peer violence) and old risks could re-emerge for the protective parent, usually the mother (for example, violent partners not uncommonly blamed women for intervention, manipulating their sense of responsibility and failure).

However, some mothers and young people reported that separation and periods in which they or their children were in care were times when they did experience safety; these were periods when risks were absent, when they had confidence that they or their children were safe and when they had the space to deal with their needs. For others, separation provided a catalyst for severing ties with unsafe family members (usually fathers) or, for some young people, with the unsafe family as a whole, re-creating relationships on new terms.

While some of the ways in which parents, young people understood and perceived safety were shared, these experiences and perceptions were not universal. Members of the same families could interpret their situations differently and expressed needs and wishes that were sometimes contradictory. Not uncommonly, fathers related safety to their personal circumstances (such as having the resources and skills to desist from violence and the absence of stressors that they believed led to their violent behaviours). In contrast, mothers and young people tended to relate safety more to the circumstances of other family members or the whole family.

Many families indicated that they understood the need for child protection agencies to centre the minimisation of risk to children in the context of family and domestic violence. However, mothers and young people also argued that the absence of such harms or threats of harm should not be taken as equivalent to safety because without proper support, other aspects of their lives could be compromised. When mothers felt disempowered by the decisions made by child protection services, and through their interactions with child protection agencies, they reported that they did not feel safe. Some mothers argued that while children who were removed might not have continued to be exposed to the risk of FDV within their own families, very often they were placed in unstable, risk-filled environments where they could continue to experience violence and a lack of safety. It was emphasised by many parents that simply replacing one risk with another, or intervening to improve safety but, in doing so, causing more distress and trauma, were not justified.

In contrast, support was considered optimal when there was early intervention, when support was preventative and wholistic in orientation, and when it was appreciative and responded to the needs of children, young people, parents and the whole family unit, rather than focused solely on responding to specific risks to children.

8.2 What enables safety through reunification?

Reunification was not considered a safe or preferred option for some families, or by some family members who believed that their security was more likely to be assured if they lived independently. The return of a family member, usually a father, who had used violence and was not willing or able to desist was considered an unsafe option by many of the women and young people. For some parents and young people, having the means to stay separated along with the legal, financial and emotional support to remain independent was vital; however, many women felt little choice other than to return to or reengage with violent partners when this assistance was unavailable.

Some of the elements of "safe reunification" for family members who wished to reunify where this could occur safely included that:

- All family members needed to be involved in the 'if, what, when, how' of reunification and were entitled to feel supported and empowered to act in their own best interests as well as their hopes for their families, parents and siblings;
- "Checking in" to ensure that families were managing: their risks, ongoing challenges and emerging issues arising through reunification;
- The absence or management of risks (including violence but also AOD misuse, financial and housing instability and conflict within the communities that surrounded them);
- Appropriate understanding of trauma and other impacts of family violence, separation and reunification, with responses embedded in practices and relationships;
- Families having some autonomy and feeling empowered to make decisions, to determine priorities and to manage challenges with support but with little external control;
- Restored sense of 'normality' in parent-child relationships, interactions with extended families, friends, communities and service systems, and in day to day family functioning;
- The capacity to see themselves as 'good parents', 'healthy families' and survivors of violence and separation; and
- Supports that appreciate the needs and impact on children, young people, parents and families experiencing violence, separation and reunification; support needs to be collaborative, wholistic, empowering, family-focused, survivor-centred and long-term in order to enable families to recovery.

8.3 Service responses to elements of safety

Many of the families in this study recalled experiences with the service system that were unhelpful and caused them unwarranted distress and challenges. However, many spoke about exceptions: staff and organisations that provided them with supports to ensure that families (mostly mothers and children) were able to stay together, that enabled them to have a say about their needs and wishes and the assistance to deal with challenges that emerged during separation and as they transitioned into reunification.

8.3.1 Decision-making and preparation for reunification

In most cases, parents, young people and families had very little choice about when or how their families would be reunified. Instead, in many cases, child protection services solely determined when they believed that parents could demonstrate their capacity to care for their children and to provide a safe environment. Participants believed that consideration of the safety needs of children during periods of separation by child protection agencies was insufficient, and sometimes kept families in a system that participants believed caused more harm than when children and young people remained in the home. Participants' preferences were for separation to be short-lived but many reported that it often took years before reunification occurred.

Across the sample, families (including parents and young people) often felt unprepared and ill-equipped for reunification, and sometimes 'rushed' into it with pressure from child protection workers and their extended families. Young people, in particular, reported having limited warning and almost no say in whether reunification should take place and if so, when and how. This lack of consultation mirrored their experience of assessment and care placements where they were often moved from one place to another with little warning or consultation.

Ongoing and incrementally increasing contact between parents and children was valued and appeared to improve the ability of family members to re-acclimatise to reunification post-separation. Reassurance by child protection and family support services was appreciated and helped parents improve their confidence. Judgmental, unclear and conflicting feedback and shifting expectations by child protection services negatively impacted on parents' ability to make positive changes and have their children returned.

8.3.2 Managing risks

It was not possible to ascertain the causal relationship between the ongoing impact of adverse childhoods, ongoing family issues and external factors and violence or other difficulties (as described in 4.4). However, it was apparent that unresolved trauma and ongoing family challenges had a profound influence on how families experienced reunification attempts and whether they were successful.

Alcohol and other drug services

Alcohol and other drug problems were significant for many families in the sample. Fathers who used violence often had alcohol or other drug issues as did mothers who found it difficult to provide for and raise their children. Some assistance was provided to families in the study to seek assistance with parental AOD issues. Drug rehabilitation and in-patient programs were often seen as helpful. However, families that were struggling financially and individual parents who felt that they were unable to care for their children alone sometimes found these programs inaccessible. Family responsive services might include those where parents and children are able to stay together, where families are supported financially to help cover costs while an employed parent is receiving treatment, and when assistance is provided to help parents. Participants believed that AOD services needed to be available throughout periods of violence, separation and reunification.

Housing

Accessible and appropriate accommodation was required for many family members attempting to escape violence, either for individual family members or for non-offending parents and children. In many instances it appeared that there were structural barriers that prevented family members from receiving priority housing, particularly when children had been removed by child protection services. Families advocated for housing policy to recognises and prioritises their needs to shorten periods of separation, and for more collaboration between child protection services, family support services and housing to ensure that appropriate housing was available when families most needed it.

Healthy coping strategies

Reunification was often a stressful and chaotic period for families who needed assistance to not 'slip back' into old ways of operating and relating. Parents who used violence when they were using alcohol and other drugs needed less destructive ways of managing stress and overcoming the challenges they experienced. As highlighted, some parents' AOD use increased after separation due to the grief and loss that ensued. Families received some assistance from family support services who were mindful of addictions but did not give examples of AOD services that were family-responsive in their approaches. Intensive support was required for families previously affected by AOD misuse to prevent relapse.

Family reunification programs were often considered helpful but, due to funding guidelines, were only provided for a few months after families reunited. In some cases, parents spoke about family support services that were provided from the point that children were removed to some months after their child was returned; parents valued assurances from the programs that support could be extended or re-initiated if problems re-emerged. Having consistent workers and services that "were there through it all" were essential for many families who enjoyed "having her there til we were back on our feet".

8.3.3 Trauma-responsive support

One of the key findings of this project was that children, young people and mothers not only experienced trauma during periods of violence, but also during periods of separation, and to a lesser extent, in periods of reunification. In the majority of families, this was coupled and compounded by parents' experiences of adverse childhoods and childhood abuse. For many young people and parents (mostly mothers), the impact of these traumas, which were often compounded by effects of historical trauma (for either parents or children), were enduring and caused significant hardship. These participants talked about being diagnosed with PTSD, of self-harming and suicide attempts and linked these to their time at home and while they or their children were in care.

Children and young people reported that they were often provided counselling but that this support did not always fully appreciate the impact of separation. Two young people and two parents argued that they anticipated that almost all children who had lived in care would have been negatively affected by their separation and by their encounters and advocated for universal trauma-informed counselling to be provided to care leavers.

Family mediation

Families who were separated often experienced enduring challenges within their relationships which sometimes reappeared as conflict. Children were sometimes resentful of their experiences and blamed their mothers for the violence and separation and found it difficult to reconcile with them, even when it had been their fathers who the primary or only perpetrators of violence. This finding is consistent with other research showing that mother-blame is a common among children and young people who grow up in domestic violence, reflecting longstanding gender discourses which hold mothers responsible for all that occurs within the family. Others felt ill-prepared to return to live with a parent who had used violence and expressed a need to be able to communicate their feelings, needs and wishes and for their parents to acknowledge, reconcile and make commitments about how they would "make up" for the harm experienced.

As noted above, other young people affected by their time in care needed to be able to voice and receive support to talk to their parents about these traumatic events. Some children and young people received counselling from programs such as HeadSpace and child and adolescent mental health services but it did not appear that this support extended to much needed child-inclusive family mediation. It should also be re-emphasised here that family mediation should only be attempted when all family members (particularly non-offending parents and children) and practitioners are confident that it is safe to do so.

8.3.4 "Recovery"-oriented reunification support

In Section 7, we suggested that for many families, reunification was but one step towards recovery and that supports needed to be available until families felt equipped to live safely and for a sense of 'normality' and stability to be achieved.

Although many families wanted child protection services to withdraw, parents often wished for some assistance to continue in order to help them manage the different impacts of violence and removal that may not present until some time after children are returned. As many families had been isolated during periods of violence and separation, families also needed to be surrounded by formal as well as informal support networks on whom they could rely for reassurance, guidance and affirmation. Peer mentoring and peer support were valued by all the families who had participated in such programs and were appreciated most because they were non-stigmatising, natural and enduring.'

Some programs were available to families for some time after reunification, however many parents reported that after their children were reunified, support petered off considerably.

Parents recognised that some programs were not funded to provide support for long periods but advocated that all families who had been reunified be linked with services and supports that could be relied on in the longer-term. This was particularly pertinent when 'reunification' is seen as an ongoing process, rather than a point in time, which might take several years and repeated cycles of removal and restoration for it to be achieved.

To successfully reunify with their children, parents needed an appreciation of how their children had experienced violence and separation and the impact of this exposure to risk. Interactions with child protection were generally difficult, with parents reporting that they felt judged and disempowered which affected their confidence and ability to provide for their children - effects that continued through reunification. Additional supports to develop skills, to regain confidence and to meet their children's needs were requested by parents.

Family-focussed collaboration

Across the sample there were limited examples shared by parents and young people of collaborative work between organisations and systems. Instead, some families talked about being "tossed" from one organisation to another, depending on the particular point in the separation-reunification process, and their needs at that time. As noted above, parents' involvement in drug programs was often restricted because no additional support was provided to their partners who struggled to care for their children and to cope financially while their partner was away. Similarly, the limited collaboration between child protection and housing services kept families in precarious situations and prolonged separation.

Families hoped that the system might work together and coordinate their efforts so that positive outcomes might be achieved. Families felt ill-equipped to bring the different services together and relied on professionals to take the lead so that family's interactions with the different parts of the sectors were less complicated and more effective.

8.4 Improving reunification towards recovery

Recommendations provided by participants in this study included advice on *what* was provided as well as *how* it was given.

8.4.1 Minimising victim-blaming and individual-focused responses

As this study has demonstrated, family and domestic violence has significant and long-lasting impacts on children, young people and other family members who are direct victims. Mothers and young people stressed the point that the responsibility for the violence and these impacts need to sit squarely on those who use it. However, participants recounted many situations when mothers, in particular, were held responsible or made to feel responsible for the violence and were deemed to be unfit parents who were unable to protect their children from harm. This finding echoes previous research that demonstrates that this blaming is often reinforced within systems and can cause damage within adult-child relationships if left unaddressed (Buchanan & Moulding, 2020; Moulding, Buchanan, & Wendt, 2015).

Participants, including some fathers, argued that the system needs to be better informed about the nature and dynamic of family violence and the strategies that mothers, in particular, put into place to minimise the risks for their children. Rather than victim-blaming, participants felt that violence-informed approaches encouraged and empowered mothers and facilitated responses to violence that enabled them to remain with their children.

8.4.2 The need for prevention and early intervention

Many of the families experiencing family and domestic violence wanted the violence to stop or for the service system to intervene in ways that preserved and supported those parts of the families (usually mothers and children) that needed to escape. A lack of preventative approaches hindered parents' and children's safety and led many to live in unsuitable, unsafe and often traumatic living circumstances. Assistance to leave and to be re-established elsewhere was always seen as a preferred alternative to child removal.

Similarly, early intervention was suggested by families who recognised the pervasive effects of early and ongoing adversities on relationships during and after periods of violence, separation and reunification. In particular, targeted supports appeared to be necessary for:

- Adults who had experienced abuse and violence in their own childhoods who needed assistance to identify abusive relationships, to manage conflict and to seek support
- Adults who were raised in care who reported having problematic notions of family and who had limited exposure to positive parenting, good role models or supportive mentors who could assist them to raise their children
- Young women who were exposed to family and domestic violence who had limiting views of themselves, of mothers and the mothering role, including how they should expect to be treated by partners
- Young men who were exposed to family and domestic violence who were displaying violent behaviours and traits of 'toxic masculinity' which may further emerge in future relationships:

> *I think – my mum was very young when she had her children, when she started having kids, and very misguided, I think if someone had seen her when she was having the children – because they know your age in hospital – and set her up with the supports like we have today I think things could have turned out a lot differently. (YOUNG MAN, aged 25+, #YP1)*

8.4.3 A better understanding of young people's needs during periods of violence and separation

Despite a commonly held view that children and young people are most often passive observers of family and domestic violence (Noble-Carr et al., 2019), young people in this study recounted many instances when they were direct victims and when they proactively acted to prevent or lessen their parents' use of violence. Others recalled strategies that they had put into place to protect their mothers and siblings, often placing themselves in danger to ensure that others were safe.

Although some young people had engagement with universal and targeted child and youth services (such as schools, mental health programs and counselling), they reported that staff from these organisations rarely demonstrated an appreciation of how they experienced violence or their most pressing safety concerns. Their placement in care was rarely supported with counselling to talk about their ongoing worries and concerns for their families and they gave no examples of how youth-oriented services were working with their mothers to escape violence or the family to minimize threats to their mother's safety. Similarly, they reported that family support and family violence programs often had no or little interaction with them and did not seem interested in understanding what they wanted or needed for themselves or their families. As demonstrated in Jade's case study, young people in this study felt 'invisible'.

When asked what guidance they would give to the system, many young people felt that it was imperative that generalist services were better aware of the nature and impacts of violence and to proactively act to ensure that young people and their families are safe. They also encouraged services that were targeted at families, particularly those experiencing FDV, to understand and

respond to their needs and to engage them in discussions about how their families might best be supported.

In some instances, young people recalled times when they were unable to receive supports when permission was not provided by their parents. This was unhelpful in times when it was unsafe for their parents to know that they were seeking support or when parents, who did not fully appreciate how violence was affecting their children, did not feel that assistance was required. Similarly, young people believed that services provided to families, particularly those experiencing FDV, should not discontinue their work with young people if parents decided that they no longer wanted or needed help. Having enduring supports was valued by young people who felt that restrictions should be lifted.

8.4.4 The need for targeted parenting support for parents who have experienced challenges

Amongst the sample, many of the parents reported that their views of parenting were influenced by their own experiences of parenting during their childhoods. As presented in section 4.4, many of the parents recalled that their childhood family homes were marked by their own experiences of abuse and harm and their exposure to family and domestic violence. This affected their own approaches to parenting, with some sharing that they found responding to their children's needs difficult. Coupled with a lack of support from extended family and informal networks, many of the parents struggled, even when violence was absent from their homes.

Similarly, many of the mothers, in particular, reported difficulty parenting while their children were in care and after their children were reunified. Having mentors who had survived similar challenges gently but reassuringly assisting them through such periods was greatly appreciated, particularly as such support was non-stigmatising, non-judgmental and grounded in shared experience.

In particular, parents needed support to understand how violence and separation had affected their children and how to best re-connect with them and help them heal from past traumas.

Although some parents had received parenting education, it appeared that such programs might be enhanced and become more responsive to the unique needs of children who had lived through such experiences.

Programs for parents were seen as most valuable when they helped parents rebuild their confidence, challenged their limiting ideas of themselves and their capacity to care and recognised the ways that parents had cared for their children during periods of violence and the tenacity they often demonstrated when working to have their children removed.

8.4.4 The need for enduring and responsive support from periods of violence through to recovery

Mothers and young people reported that much of the service system was focused on a particular issue facing families (i.e. family violence) or a particular point in time (i.e during reunification) and that this often meant that they had to go to multiple places to get their needs met and be engaged with workers in a time-limited way. This was not helpful for families who were experiencing significant challenge and chaos and who already felt judged or rejected by the services that worked with them. Having programs which fostered positive, trusting relationships with key staff who were available to them for longer periods of time and who were flexible and reactive to emerging and enduring issues seemed vital. When this was not possible, families appreciated workers and services who actively helped them access appropriate services and supported them to connect with 'good' workers was greatly valued.

Again, families who were engaged in mentoring programs valued the fact that they were able to access these mentors at different times and to respond to a variety of different needs. These mentors provided support and, when they were unable to meet family's needs, suggested other places where they themselves had been that had been helpful.

9. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This study presents the lived experiences of mothers, fathers and young people who have encountered separation as a result of family and domestic violence. Although there has been a growing appreciation of the extent of FDV within the community and concerted efforts to provide appropriate supports for family members, participant accounts suggest that systems have much to do to improve family's outcomes: during periods of violence, separation and reunification.

One of the key strategies suggested by families and demonstrated through this project was the value in working with those most affected by FDV in shaping responses for families that recognise past adversities and their enduring impacts, family's safety needs and the ways that services and systems can both help and hinder positive outcomes. Central to this is a commitment to ensuring that families (including mothers, fathers and young people) are seen as vital partners in designing and informing the implementation of interventions, programs and services (Fernandez & Lee, 2013). Many participants felt that they were voiceless and, in the case of mothers and young people, invisible and called for a greater appreciation for their need to be empowered to have more control of their lives.

As discussed, families in this study found periods of separation extremely challenging and were often characterised as being traumatising and traumatic. Even when children and young people were removed to escape violence, many reported that they were not nor did they feel safe while in care. This took their toll on their relationships with others, their confidence in adults and organisations and their connections to families during and after reunification. When child protection agencies remove children and are unable to provide them with a sense of safety, effort must be invested to help them heal, to recover and to restore the relationships that they are keen to reconcile.

The need to see reunification as an important but not final step in family recovery was a key finding of this study. Families asserted that reunification was difficult and caused significant stress and anxiety for all family members and that supports were withdrawn before families had the capacity to overcome the many challenges that they experienced and before the long-term impacts of separation were observed and managed. Providing a safety net for families through their reunification and recovery is warranted.

This study would not have been possible if it were not for the courage and openness of the families who participated. Although many stories were painful to recall, participants were often determined to share their experiences so that others might not have to go through similar challenges and so that systems and services could be improved so that families experiencing FDV could be provided with the safety that they so desperately needed.

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University of South Australia	**Supporting Safe Reunification in the Context of Family Violence** **Participant Pre-Interview Screening Tool** (Parents and Carers)

☐ EXPLAIN

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: Today we're going to talk about family violence and what needs to be done to keep young people and their families safe from harm.

Because talking about things like family violence and being separated from family is sensitive and might bring up tough feelings we're suggesting that people who are not in a good headspace, who are stressed or upset or who are going through some rough times might sit out this time.

Is it OK if I ask a few questions to help you and I decide if you're in an OK space to participate?

☐ SCREEN (PART 1)

	Ask:		***Act:***
☐	Is there anything happening in your life at the moment that might make answering questions about your family or violence uncomfortable, upsetting or difficult?	☐	If they are going through a legal process, suggest that you talk with them another time.
☐	*1. Are you currently experiencing family violence in your home?*	☐	Together decide whether or not it's safe for them to participate.
☐	*2. Are you going through a legal process related to your safety or experiences of being harmed?*		
☐	*3. Are you getting any treatment for abuse or offending?*	☐	If they disclose abuse / violence follow the protocol, as below.
☐	Are you feeling particularly stressed, anxious, depressed or particularly emotional at the moment?	☐	If you consider it significant, suggest that the parent does an interview at another time. This might be via phone or skype.
☐	Do you have people around you that you can talk to if you feel worried or even just a bit flat after talking?	☐	If you consider it significant, suggest that the parent does an interview at another time. This might be via phone or skype.
☐	*1. Can you tell me a bit about it?*	☐	If they say yes but still want to participate, negotiate some parameters:
	2. Is it getting in the way of you doing things you need to do (like sports, work etc.)?		• *You're sure that they have someone they can get support from after the interview if they're not feeling safe*
	3. Have you been in hospital lately?		• *You'll check in once in a while to see how they're traveling*
	4. How safe are you feeling at the moment?		• *You can decide, together, if there are any questions that seem a bit too 'raw'*

☐			You can do an initial 15 minutes (set an alarm) and at the end of that time see whether they'd like to continue.
☐	Do you have people around you that you can talk to if you feel worried or even just a bit flat after talking?	☐	If they say no, talk to them about how they usually manage feelings etc. and decide, together, whether they might participate. You should invest more time in "checking in" with parents who don't have a support person in the service and come up with some options at the end of the interview.

☐ SCREEN (PART 2)

Other parents we've spoken to about family violence have said that sometimes they find it a bit different – maybe because they've had a negative experience of disclosing violence or are scared to do so or because it's something that makes them think about things that might have happened to them in the past.

It's up to you to keep a check of how you're going. It's cool if you'd like a break, if you'd like to skip questions or if you decide you want to stop.

At the same time, it's my responsibility to keep an eye on how you're traveling. If it's OK with you I might check in every once in a while to see how you're going. Is this OK?

ATTACHMENT 2: DISTRESS PROTOCOL

Indications of distress during the interview	Questions	Action/s
Display signs of distress or upset (ie crying, shaky voice)	1. Stop the interview 2. Acknowledge the emotion 3. Offer support and allow them to "regroup" 4. Assess their status: - "what's going on for you?" - "what feelings are you having?" - Do you feel you are able to go about your day? - Do you feel safe? 5. Offer options - What do you want to do? Did you want to wrap it up here or stop for a bit or keep going?	IF the young person if quite distressed or upset the interview should be halted. "I'm worried about you. The interview seems to have brought up some tough emotions for you and I want to make sure that you're going to be OK. " 1. Remind the young person you have a responsibility to act 2. Identify who to best inform and what other actions might be necessary (in negotiation with YP) 3. Act 4. Report situation to team leader
Indicates that they are thinking of hurting themselves	1. Stop the interview 2. Express concern 3. Assess situation - What thoughts are you having? - Do you intend to harm yourself? - How do you intend to harm yourself? - When do you intend to harm yourself? - What do you need so that you won't harm yourself? 4. Determine if the person is in **imminent danger to self**	1. Identify supports 2. If there is imminent danger remind the young person that you have a responsibility to act 3. Identify who to best inform and what other actions might be necessary (in negotiation with YP) 4. Act (support, refer, report) 5. Report situation to team leader
Indicates that they are thinking of hurting others	1. Stop the interview 2. Express concern 3. Assess situation - What thoughts are you having? - Do you intend to harm someone else? - How do you intend to harm them? - When do you intend to harm them? - What do you need so that you won't harm them? 4. Determine if there is in **imminent danger**	1. Identify supports 2. If there is imminent danger remind the young person that you have a responsibility to act 3. Identify who to best inform and what other actions might be necessary (in negotiation with YP) 4. Act (support, refer, report) 5. Report situation to team leader

| Indicates that they might be in danger if anyone (or someone in particular) found out about their participation in the study | 1. Stop the interview
2. Assess the danger / threat:
- How might you be in danger?
- How might the other person find out that you participated?
- What do you think the other person would do if they found out?
3. Determine if the person is experiencing a safety concern | 1. Negotiate a plan to ensure that the likelihood that the participant encounter the potentially threatening individual is minimal
2. Develop a safety plan in the unlikely event that this individual is encountered |

ATTACHMENT 3: EXAMPLE CONSENT FORM (PARENTS)

Supporting Safe Reunification in the Context of Family Violence
Consent Form for Focus Group with Parents/Carers

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

Section 1: Participant certification

Please let us know if you are happy to be involved by answering yes or no to the following questions:

I have read the participant information sheet or had it read to me	☐ Yes	☐ No
I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.	☐ Yes	☐ No
I understand that my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw from the research project at any stage without reason or consequence.	☐ Yes	☐ No
I understand that if I feel distressed, the interview will be stopped and the researcher will talk to me about how best they can support me to address what I am feeling.	☐ Yes	☐ No
I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, my individual responses are confidential and the researchers will not publish anything that can identify me or what I shared.	☐ Yes	☐ No
I understand that the information I share with the researcher will remain confidential; except:	☐ Yes	☐ No

- If they are worried about my safety or the safety of someone else (e.g., my child/ren)
- If I give them permission to share something so I can get help or support

In each of these situations, the researcher will talk to me about what needs to be done and will involve me in coming up with a plan. If they believe there is a risk to my safety or the safety of others (e.g., my child(ren)), they will notify the appropriate authorities who may then investigate and take formal action to address the risk.

I understand that I will not receive direct personal benefit from taking part in this project.	☐ Yes	☐ No
I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded but this recording will be destroyed after it has been transcribed and identifiable information removed.	☐ Yes	☐ No
I would like to be given a copy of this form to take home.	☐ Yes	☐ No

I agree that:

- I will maintain the confidentiality of group discussions and protect the identification of other group participants.	☐ Yes	☐ No
- I understand my data will be stored as an electronic file in a password protected computer file on the research organisation's share drive, which is only accessible by password protected computers in the researcher's secure office at 195 North Terrace, Adelaide.	☐ Yes	☐ No

Section 2: Consent to Participate		
I consent to participate in this project about family violence and what is needed to ensure that young people are safe when they return home to their families	☐ Yes	☐ No
Participant Signature	*Printed Name*	*Date*

Any Questions?
If you have any questions about the project you can talk to the researchers at the time of the interview. Alternatively, contact Associate Professor Tim Moore on 0466 416 148 or via email tim.moore@unisa.edu.au

Researcher to Complete		
I have provided information about this research project to the participant and believe they understand what is involved.		
Researcher Signature	*Printed Name*	*Date*

Research Team	
Professor Fiona Arney (UniSA)	Dr Fiona Buchanan (UniSA)
Professor Leah Bromfield (UniSA)	Dr Christina Fernandes (Curtin University)
Professor Donna Chung (Curtin University)	Dr Robyn Martin (Curtin University)
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