I believe you

Children and young people's experiences of seeking help, securing help & navigating the family violence system

Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we come together to conduct our research and recognise that these lands have always been places of learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We pay respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders – past and present – and acknowledge the important role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and their ongoing leadership in responding to domestic, family and sexual violence.

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Professor Kate Fitz-Gibbon led this project in her capacity as Director of the Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre. The Report findings are wholly independent of Kate Fitz-Gibbon's role as Chair of Respect Victoria.

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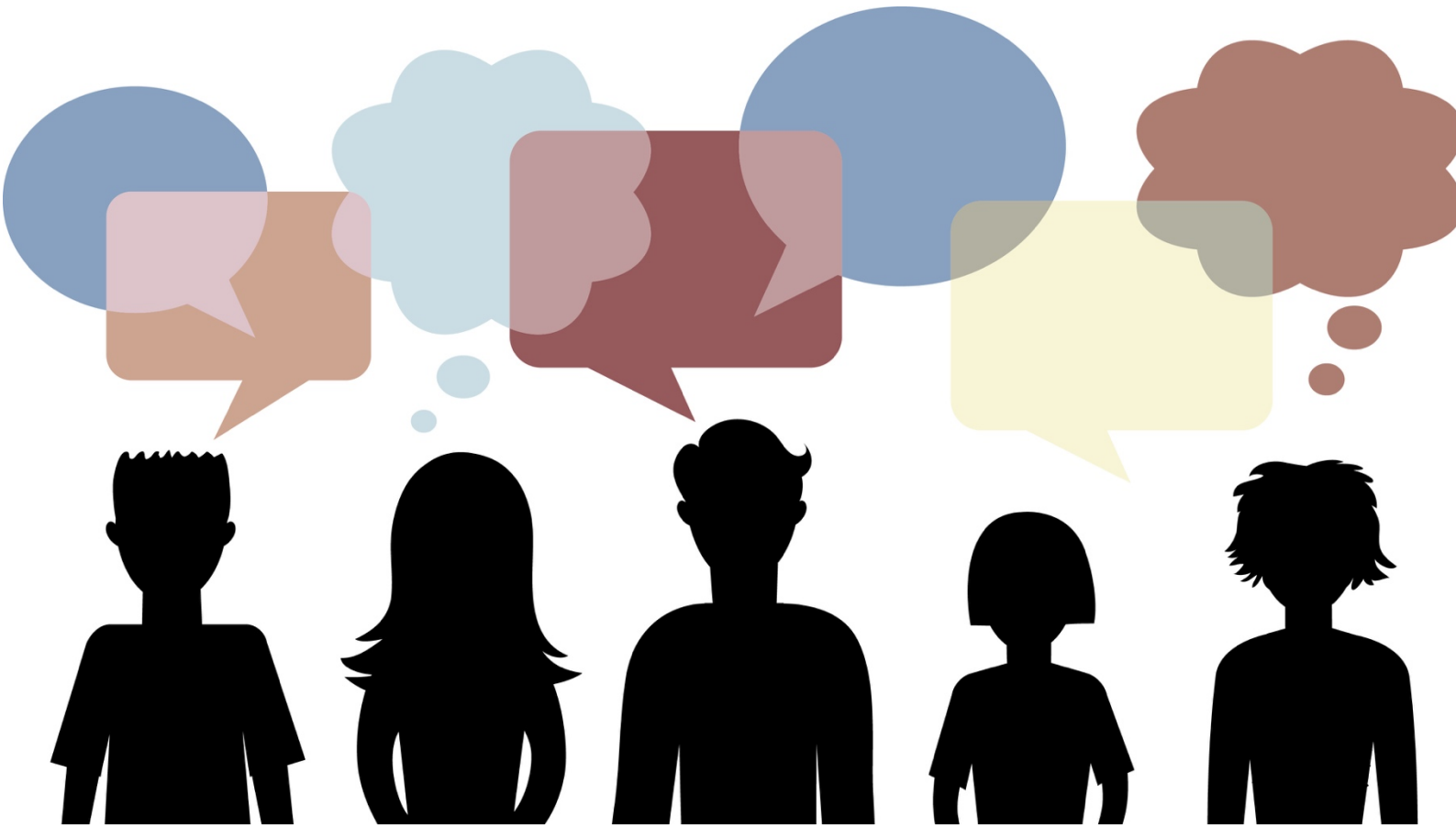
Abbreviations

ACU	Australian Catholic University
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
ANROWS	Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety
CFCA	Child Family Community Australia
CISS	Child Information Sharing Scheme
CYP	Children and young people
DFSM	Domestic Violence NSW Service Management
DFV	Domestic and family violence
DSS	Department of Social Services
FSV	Family Safety Victoria
FVISS	Family Violence Information Sharing Scheme
MARAM	Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework
MCM	Melbourne City Mission
MGFVPC	Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre
RCFV	Royal Commission into Family Violence



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Executive Summary

In Australia, at the national and state level, there is increasing acknowledgement of the need to better respond to children and young people as victim-survivors of family violence in their own right. The recently released National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 (Department of Social Services, 2022) embeds this acknowledgement, and there have been calls at the state and national level to ensure that early intervention and system responses are reformed to ensure age-appropriate and child-centred practices.

Despite this, to date there has been minimal research conducted directly with children and young people who have experienced family violence. We acknowledge the paramount importance of ensuring the safety of young persons and of meeting critical ethical considerations; yet, as Victoria progresses its family violence reform agenda, it is also vitally important that that the views and expertise of young victim-survivors are drawn upon to influence policy and practice design. This study privileges the voices of children and young people with lived experience of family violence. It seeks to extend current understandings of how child-specific risk identification, assessment and management practices can best be developed, implemented and embedded across Victoria.

This research and Final Report was contracted by Family Safety Victoria and forms part of the Child and Young Person Victim Survivor-focused Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM) practice guidance project conducted in 2022. Specifically, this report presents the findings from 17 in-depth interviews conducted with Victorian children and young people, from the ages of 10 to 25, with lived experience of family violence. This research seeks to give voice to the experiences and expertise of children and young people who have experienced family violence and have navigated a range of different services and supports across the whole of Victoria's family violence response system.

The in-depth interviews conducted with children and young people explored three overarching topics:

- wellbeing,
- direct engagement strategies, and
- resilience and resistance.

Children and young people in this study were unanimous in agreement that current responses to young victim-survivors of family violence are not adequate and that there are significant opportunities to improve current practices.

This study highlights the importance of:

- system enhancements in terms of system navigation and accessibility,
- ensuring the availability of child-centric spaces,
- age-appropriate supports and individualised responses,
- safe and trauma informed practices, and
- greater consistency in the operation of mandatory reporting requirements.

Each of these recommended system enhancements is essential to ensuring safety, empowerment and better outcomes for children and young people experiencing family violence.

The experiences of the children and young people who participated in this study are also critical to understanding how practitioners should engage young victim-survivors in safe and validating conversations about the abuse they have experienced. The reflections provided by children and young people highlight their preference for having communication with them tailored to account for individual age-specific needs – along with discrete sensitivities, such as emotional or trauma-based requirements, language barriers and accessibility needs. Young people warned of the potential for alienation resulting from the use of specialist language or labels and binary perpetrator and victim-survivor categorisations.

Children and young people interviewed also spoke of the need for responses to include an educative function that can disrupt cycles of violence and the normalisation of abuse. Young people spoke to the importance of not feeling patronised in the process of receiving advice and support. They discussed their critical need to receive validation and the need of authentic first points of contact that provide recognition of the harms experienced. Having a sense of agency and self-respect emerged from young people's comments as a crucial component of the pathway to support and recovery.

It is important to note that while there was consensus in some aspects of children and young people's responses, there were also important points of difference, which are captured throughout this report. This bears out an overarching finding: while commonalities and themes can be discerned in children and young people's perspectives, there is also a clear need for individualised and tailored supports. This point is critical to understanding how the findings of this research can be translated into practice. It is crucial that practitioners are equipped to use their professional judgment to tailor and individualise any recommended strategies for engagement.

Introduction

In Australia, at the national and state level, there is increasing acknowledgement of the need to better respond to children and young people as victim-survivors of family violence in their own right. The recently released National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 (Department of Social Services, 2022) embeds this acknowledgement, and there have been calls at the state and national level to ensure that early intervention and system responses are reformed to ensure age-appropriate and child-centred practices.

A critical component of improving responses to children and young people who experience family violence relates to the development, implementation and effective embedding of child-centred risk identification, assessment and management. Risk assessment practices in Australia, and elsewhere globally, have long been adult-centric (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2019; McCulloch et al., 2016). In 2015, the findings of the Coronial Inquest into the 'premeditated' killing of Luke Batty concluded that there was 'no validated risk assessment tool' at the time to predict the likelihood of his death (Gray, 2015, p.1). The Inquest recommended improved risk assessment practices, coordinated risk management and safety planning to better ensure that the family violence risks experienced by a child are more readily identified, and responded to more effectively (Gray, 2015, pp.3-4).

In the year following the Inquest, the 2016 report of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV) described children as the 'silent' victims of family violence (Fitz-Gibbon & O'Brien, 2016) and made key recommendations related to the development of child-specific family violence risk assessment practices. Specifically, Recommendation 1 called for the review and subsequent implementation of a revised risk assessment and management framework that would set out responsibilities for screening, risk assessment and management, information sharing and referral throughout Victorian agencies. The recommendation stated that the new framework should incorporate evidence-based risk indicators specific to children and young people (RCFV, 2016). The Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM) was released and commenced operating for a first round of organisations across Victoria on 27 September 2018. Adult and child victim survivor-focused Practice Guides and assessment tools were released in 2019, and adult perpetrator-focused guides and assessment tools were released in 2021.

The MARAM Framework and existing Practice Guides include information on recognising children as victim-survivors in their own right, along with risk assessment and safety planning tools for working with children and young people. While the 2019 published guidance was largely focused on indirect risk assessment and safety planning through the parent who is not using violence, some information was also provided on direct engagement with children and young people. At the time of publication, it was acknowledged that direct risk assessment and risk management for children and young people

remained a gap; also acknowledged was the need for a level of capability uplift among organisations ahead of the introduction of additional guidance on comprehensive and direct work with children and young people. To address this, Family Safety Victoria (FSV) have recently established the Child and Young Person Victim Survivor-focused MARAM practice guidance project, which seeks to address identified gaps in the service system's responses to family violence risk and wellbeing for CYP across all the workforces prescribed by the Victorian Government. The present study forms one component of that project and represents a critical opportunity to ensure that the voices of children and young people with lived experience of family violence contribute to the development and delivery of this pivotal reform project.

This study

In 2022, members of the Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre (MGFVPC) were contracted by FSV to undertake a research project to support the development of MARAM practice guidance. The current project was designed to fulfil these requirements, and this report presents the findings from 17 in-depth interviews conducted with Victorian children and young people, from the ages of 10 to 25, with lived experience of family violence.

The importance of listening to the voices of children and young people

Recent research conducted by the Australian Institute of Family studies (2016-18) contends that the participation of children and young people in research 'is vital to informing policies and practices that impact their lives' (AIFS 2020). Research produced by Domestic Violence NSW Service Management (DVSM), which explored how their services work with children and young people impacted by family violence, found that most research on children's needs was written from an adult perspective (2017, 11). DVSM did, however, identify what they described as a 'small and growing body of research' focused on children and young people's voices (DVSM 2017, 11). An overarching finding of this research was that 'children talk about feelings and responsibilities, rather than conditions and behaviours' (DVSM 2017, 11). The literature review further revealed that in accounts of their experiences, children and young people drew attention to the following: their substantial 'fear and anxiety'; their feelings of tension caused by constant anticipation of violence; their fears for other family members; their need to take on adult responsibilities; their feelings of isolation caused by keeping DFV a secret; their feeling ashamed of family violence; their feelings of 'anger and resentment' (DVSM 2017, 11).

Despite this acknowledgement there has been minimal research conducted directly with children and young people who have experienced family violence. We acknowledge the paramount importance of ensuring the safety of young persons and of meeting critical ethical considerations; yet, as Victoria progresses its family violence reform agenda, it is also vitally important that that the views and expertise of young victim-survivors are drawn upon to influence policy and practice design. This study privileges the voices of children and young people with lived experience of family violence. In doing so, it seeks to extend current understandings of how child-specific risk identification, assessment and management practices can best be developed, implemented and embedded across Victoria.

This report

This report presents the key findings and thematic analysis of interviews with 17 children and young people living in Victoria who have had experience of family violence. The report sets out details about the study design and then presents the findings organised into five key areas:

1. Young people's perceptions of wellbeing and keeping safe

2. The invisibility of children and young people in system responses to family violence
3. The importance of creating space for children and young people to safely disclose
4. Improving system responses
5. Experiences of mandatory reporting requirements.

The final section of the report provides a concise summary of the policy and practice implications of this research. The report foregrounds the voices of the research participants through the frequent use of direct quotes from the children and young people. We have adopted this approach to ensure that our analysis remains proximate to the meanings the participants attributed to the events and the feelings they recounted. It also ensures that the report and presentation of the research findings are led by the voices of those children and young people who generously shared their experiences and expertise.

This project was developed and carried out as a component of the Victorian Government's family violence reform agenda, including specifically the development of the Child and Young Person-focused MARAM practice guidance and tools. The project seeks to support that work by providing much needed direct engagement with children and young people with lived experience of family violence – to understand their experiences of seeking support in the Victorian family violence system, their views on engagement strategies, and their experiences of managing their safety and support needs.

To achieve these aims, this project engaged children and young people in Victoria aged 10-25 with lived experience of family violence. The in-depth interviews conducted with them explored three overarching topics:

- wellbeing,
- direct engagement strategies, and
- resilience and resistance.

The research team does not suggest that the cohort of young people who participated in this research offers state-wide representative viewpoints. However, the team sought to include the voices of First Nations young people, young people who identified as having a disability, gender diverse young people, culturally and linguistically diverse young people, rural and regional young people, and young people who have experienced adolescent violence. For a full demographic description of the research participants see Participant Demographics below.

Project Advisory Group

A small Project Advisory Group comprising three young advocates was formed at the outset of this project to support its design and delivery. Membership of the Project Advisory Group was confirmed in consultation with key organisations and FSV. The Project Advisory Group included a young-person representative of the Victorian Victim-Survivors Advisory Council as well as members of Berry Street Y-Change. It was the intention of the research team to convene the Advisory Group in team meetings, but due to competing commitments and unforeseen events, the team's engagement with the Project Advisory Group members largely occurred individually. The project advisors influenced the design of the interviews, including by workshopping the overarching focuses and the questions. One member of the Project Advisory Group, Kirra, was also involved during the data collection phase of the research. Kirra conducted three interviews with participating young persons who preferred that another young advocate take this role.

In-depth interviews with Victorian children and young people

In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 Victorian children and young people with lived experience of family violence, aged between 10 and 25. The original study design proposed that data collection would include focus groups and small group interviews; however, the offer of focus groups was not taken up by any young people or organisations. All young people opted to be interviewed individually, with only one interview involving two participants, who were siblings. All interviews were conducted online using Zoom. Their duration varied, from 20 to 90 minutes.

Reflecting the requirements of the project, the interviews were used to gather the insights of children and young people on the following:

Thematic focus	Guiding questions
Wellbeing	• What does wellbeing mean to children and young people? • How do children and young people want to be engaged about wellbeing?
Direct engagement strategies	• What worked and didn't work for them in engaging with services and seeking support? • How would they want to be asked about family violence risk, other risk/harm and wellbeing? • How might engagement look at different ages/stages that children interact with the service system? • How would they want professionals to respond to their disclosures of family violence?
Resilience and resistance	• How did they keep themselves safe? • How do they want the service system to respond to this?

A thematic interview schedule was developed by the Monash research team based on the guiding questions provided by FSV (see Appendix A for a copy of the thematic interview schedule). The interview schedule was then reviewed and revised by the research team following the advice of members of the Project Advisory Group.

Recruitment

Children and young people, aged 10 to 25 years old, were recruited via the professional networks of the MGFVPC research team and in consultation with FSV. This included engagement with key sector organisations. During the project establishment phase the research team corresponded with members of:

- Berry Street Y-Change,
- Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP),
- Victorian Victim Survivor Advisory Council (VSAC),
- Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVIC),
- Youth Disability and Advocacy Service (YDAS),
- Koori Youth Council,
- Safe + Equal, and
- the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY).

These initial correspondences were utilised to determine the most effective recruitment strategy for children and young people connected with each organisation. Next, the research team contacted organisations and professionals across Victoria to gauge whether they were connected with children and young people who met the eligibility requirements for the study and were in a supported environment. This use of support services and youth organisations in recruitment was deliberate. Monash research team members were ever-conscious that the research process must not harm or further traumatise these young people. Team members relied on the professional judgment of those in contact with the young people to determine whether they were in the safe and supported points of their journey necessary to make participation feasible.

Ethical considerations[1]

Ethics approval for this study was obtained via the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). It was determined that young people aged 15 years and older could consent to participate in the research themselves. For children aged 10 to 14 years, parental consent was also required.

As noted above, the thematic interview schedule based on the key project aims was co-produced with members of the Project Advisory Group. Following their advice, numerous questions in the interview schedule were adapted and expanded to include a 'real world' scenario. For example, the question, 'What is the best way to ask about how your mental health or your physical health and wellbeing is going?' was supplemented with the additional prompt, 'For example, if your teacher or worker wants to ask how you are or what is going on for you, how would you like to be asked about this?'. A Project Advisory Group member also recommended that all interviews include wellbeing 'check ins' and 'check outs'. Interviewers would 'check in' with research participants at the outset of the interview by asking the participant to rate how they were feeling that day on a scale of 1-10. They also asked if

[1] MUHREC Project ID: 32644.

there was anything the participant needed to feel present and capable of taking part – such as sharing something fun (something they have been watching, listening to or reading lately), turning their camera off, or taking a break if necessary. Upon completion of the interview, the interviewer would 'check out' with the participant by asking, firstly, how they felt now that the interview was over and, secondly, what they planned on doing once the Zoom or phone call ended. The emphasis here was on doing something 'nice' or comforting for themselves.

A member of the Project Advisory Group also worked with the research team to develop an adapted child-friendly version of the project Explanatory Statement, which was designed to explain all essential aspects of the project (as per ethical obligations) without the overuse of jargon. The full Explanatory Statement was also made available, and all participants were given more than one opportunity to discuss the Explanatory Statement and ask any questions they wished about any aspect of the research project before participating in the interview.

Following each interview, all participants were sent a thank-you email that included researcher contact details and a $100 digital gift voucher in recognition of their expertise and time spent contributing to the research. A list of support services was also provided in this thank-you email, including services specific to children and young people which could be accessed via phone, web chat, websites or in person.

Data analysis

All interviews with children and young people were audio recorded and then transcribed in full with the consent of the participants. Following transcription, the data was de-identified and a pseudonym assigned to each participant. Children and young people are referred to only by these pseudonyms throughout this report to ensure anonymity of participation.

The complete interview dataset was thematically analysed by members of the research team using NVivo data analysis software. A qualitative description method by Sandelowski was utilised to analyse the data, whereby researchers 'seek descriptive validity', that is, 'an accurate accounting of events that most people (including researchers and participants) observing the same event would agree is accurate' (Sandelowski 2000). This method includes the concept of 'interpretive validity', which similarly translates to 'an accurate accounting of the meanings participants attributed to those events that those participants would agree is accurate' (Sandelowski 2000). This method is frequently utilised by researchers from the MGFVPC, particularly in qualitative research with hard-to-reach populations such as family violence victim-survivors, and children and young people. The emphasis on descriptive validity reflects the MGFVPC's commitment to developing a grounded analytical approach through the voices and insights of populations that are typically not heard (Maher et al. 2018, 21; see also McCulloch et al., 2020; McGowan & Elliot 2019).

Participant demographics

Seventeen children and young people were interviewed for this research. At the conclusion of each interview the interviewer shared a short survey with the interview participant for their completion. This was done to capture basic demographic information. The survey was administered through Qualtrics software, and all data collected was anonymous. All but one of the participants interviewed completed the survey. The participant demographics below are based on the 16 participants who completed the survey and do not include the demographic details of the final interview participant.

Interviews were conducted with children and young people between the ages of 10 years old and 25 years old. The ages of the participants interviewed were:

- 25 years old (12.5%, n=2)
- 22 years old (19%, n=3)
- 20 years old (25%, n=4)
- 19 years old (6%, n=1)
- 18 years old (12.5%, n=2)
- 17 years old (6%, n=1)
- 16 years old (6%, n=1)
- 15 years old (6%, n=1)
- 10 years old (6%, n=1)

Sixty-nine per cent of the young people interviewed identified as female, and 12.5 per cent identified as male. Three participants identified as being gender diverse, with the interview participants including one transman (6%), one agender identifying participant (6%) and one non-binary participant (6%). Just over half of the young people interviewed described their sexuality as heterosexual (56%, n=9). Other interview participants identified as bisexual (12.5%, n=2), queer (12.5%, n=2) and asexual (6%, n=1). In response to this question on sexual identity one participant chose 'prefer not to say' and another respondent wrote 'no idea'.

Thirty-one per cent of interview participants indicated that they were from a migrant, refugee and/or culturally and linguistically diverse background (n=5), with just under 70 per cent noting that they were not (69%, n=11). One interview participant identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and one other young person interviewed selected 'prefer not to say' in response to the question on First Nations identity. The majority of young people interviewed did not identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (87.5%, n=14).

Noting the impact that experiences of disability have on the risk of family violence, as well as service and support needs (see further Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022a, 2022b), the researchers asked young people whether they identify as having a disability. Forty-four per cent (n=7) of the interview participants identified as having a disability and 44 per cent (n=7) did not. One participant chose 'prefer not to say' for this question.

The majority of young people interviewed lived in a metropolitan area (94%, n-15). One interview participant lived in a regional area (6%, n=1). In relation to housing and experiences of homelessness, 62.5 per cent (n=10) of young people interviewed had experienced homelessness while 31.5 per cent (n=5) had not. One participant did not answer this question. One research participant (6%) reported they previously lived in the out of home care system, one person chose 'prefer not to say' and 87.5% (n-14) had not lived in out of home care arrangements.

Project findings

The project findings are organised into five thematic focuses:

1. Young people's perceptions of wellbeing and keeping safe
2. The invisibility of children and young people in system responses to family violence
3. The importance of creating space for children and young people to safely disclose
4. Improving system responses
5. Young people's experiences of mandatory reporting requirements.

It is important to note that while there was consensus in some aspects of children and young people's responses, there were also important points of difference, which we capture throughout the presentation of findings in this report. This bears out an overarching finding: while commonalities and themes can be discerned in children and young people's perspectives, there is also a clear need for individualised and tailored supports. This point is critical to understanding how the findings of this research can be translated into practice. It is crucial that practitioners are equipped to use their professional judgment to tailor and individualise any recommended strategies for engagement.

1. Young people's perceptions of wellbeing and keeping safe

> It's really, really important to have a safe space or somewhere you're able to express yourself and be loved unconditionally. And I think that has a huge part in how your mental health is or how you are and what your wellbeing is like, because I would personally say, over my lifespan so far, I've probably had really poor mental and physical health. And I would say that I've had a pretty bad wellbeing because overall, I wasn't happy. I wasn't safe. I was really isolated. So, friendships and the type of bond you have with your family and all of that really does contribute to wellbeing. And to me, it would probably be being safe and loved. (Amira)

This section presents the findings of how young people understand and perceived their own wellbeing. It also presents the strategies they employed to create safe spaces for themselves both during and following their experiences of family violence. Each interview began with the open-ended question, 'what does wellbeing mean to you?'. It elicited a range of responses from children and young people, demonstrating that this is not necessarily a term that easily resonates with this cohort. Some young people felt unable to describe what wellbeing meant to them. Others provided detailed descriptions of what wellbeing meant to them now but were rarely able to place what it had meant to them during their experience of family violence. Often, interview participants appeared to struggle with the concept of wellbeing as relevant to their childhood, which was characterised by feelings of insecurity.

For some young people the discussion with the interviewer provided an opportunity to think through what wellbeing meant to them, as captured in the comments made by one young person:

> I think it's kind of difficult because it's something I'm still exploring and discovering. I think especially because I – in the grand scheme of things, it's only not even quite two full years since I left the abusive environment … I live in a youth resi now, so I think the biggest thing I've noticed is having a place that I feel I have control over in terms of making a space that is my own and makes me feel happy … it's a place that I enjoy coming back to. And I think the other part is also being able to work through my experiences, especially with other people to support me and being believed or being heard and not being challenged on my experiences, which I think prior to probably even the past couple of months has been the norm, of being dismissed and challenged. (Dylan)

Several children and young people interviewed commented on their own self-care and identified stability in their moods and physical health as central to the characterisation of a positive wellbeing:

> I wouldn't say stress-free, but rather have very significantly reduced amounts of stress and anxiety. (Drew)

> It would include self-care, what it looks like to the person and I guess a state of good health I guess. I've never really been asked about wellbeing before but I think that it means a good person is in overall good health. So, that would include mental, that would include physical, psychological, all those things that make up a person. (Alba)

> If I was to define what it is generally it'd be just like stability in mental and physical health. (Eliza)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the commonality of experiences of childhood family violence, a key theme that emerged among children and young people interviewed was that wellbeing is inextricable from safety – broadly defined as physical safety, mental safety, stability in relationships and knowing that they are loved. This is captured in the comments of three young people:

> Wellbeing … means a lot of things. I guess it means me feeling safe, both physically and mentally, having a sense of stability in my relationships and being able to maintain relationships and speak to someone when I'm not feeling okay. (Samuel)

> Wellbeing for me is probably not about money but more of yourself. So like mentally and focusing on yourself more than others, and putting yourself first. And just focusing on what makes you happy, than what makes others happy. (Casper)

> Wellbeing to me means feeling happy within myself, knowing that I'm able to do daily tasks without feeling boundaries as such or feeling that some tasks might be a struggle. And then feeling safe. (Samantha)

For one young person interviewed, the temporality of wellbeing was critical to their understanding of what it meant at different points of their life. They recounted:

> I think wellbeing for me is recognising what point I need to step back and give myself some time to recover … it's more about realising that you need a break at some point or yes, push yourself. But there's a point at which you're just going to start breaking down. And it's not actually having any positive impact and you're just going to sit there going backwards. And that's the point where you need to be like, I'm going to take a step out of this little zone that I'm in. And I'm going to do something that will recharge me or re-energise me because you can't keep burning fuel without recharging. (Amira)

While the interviews did not specifically ask children and young people to share details of their experiences of family violence, participants often did so, particularly focusing on the impact that their experiences of abuse and trauma had on them. These impacts were inextricably connected to their understandings of what wellbeing was. For example, one young person commented:

> *I didn't really get to experience myself and who I was at a really crucial time to do so and I feel like that is a really significant impact that family violence has on children and young people. It really does damage their development and health development. (Alba)*

In addition to noting the range of physical, mental and emotional impacts that their experiences of family violence victimisation had upon them, children and young people in this study also reflected on the impact that their experiences continue to have on forming trusting relationships. As one young person explained:

> *Yes, it's been an experience and it has shaped me but it's not all that I am, like the term 'damaged goods', right? That's why I also struggled especially into my young adulthood, connecting with people as well and not a lot of people I know as well experienced what I experienced, not to assume that. (Alba)*

As captured here, for several of the young people interviewed, the impacts of family violence were strongly associated with their sense of connection to others within their family, friendship circles and wider community.

The lack of a commonly shared understanding of wellbeing is a critical finding of this research. It demonstrates that this is not a concept – or a state of being – readily comprehended or identified with by the children and young people within this study. While each could speak in detail about their own feelings and the impact that experiences of violence had had on them, references to wellbeing as a central concept were rarely made by the children and young people themselves.

Creating safe spaces for themselves

> "I call it survival mode, which for the most part is I've probably lived more of my life in that than I haven't, probably from the ages of six to even now, in some aspects. And that's been a major struggle is that I don't know or I don't remember – but I don't really know what it's like to not live in that state or to live like that … It almost feels like I lose my touch with reality … it's kind of a cliché, I suppose, but it almost is exactly like living by evolutionary standards as an animal, where I only ever did the things, the practical things that would keep me safe and keep me alive, and anything extra, anything emotional or cognitive, I did not access for years on end. (Dylan)

Throughout the interviews children and young people often reflected on the measures they put in place during their childhoods to keep themselves safe – and in many cases to try to keep other family members safe – in the absence of wellbeing and safety. For some young people that space – and the creation of it – was viewed as a critical tactic to support personal wellbeing. As one young person described:

> *It's really, really important to have a safe space or somewhere you're able to express yourself and be loved unconditionally. And I think that has a huge part in how your mental health is or how you are and what your wellbeing is like, because I would personally say, over my lifespan so far, I've probably had really poor mental and physical health. And I would say that I've had a pretty bad wellbeing because overall, I wasn't happy. I wasn't safe. I was really isolated. So, friendships and the type of bond you have with your family and all of that really does contribute to wellbeing. And to me, it would probably be being safe and loved. (Amira)*

However, for other young people interviewed the pursuit of a safe space required significant comprises to their own wellbeing. One example was a young person interviewed who had experienced periods of being mute during their childhood in an attempt to divert attention away from them and minimise the abuse experienced. They explained:

> *The best and really only thing that I could do was make myself as quiet and as small as possible. I guess kind of trying to become invisible and not draw attention to myself or anything. And so, even during that – like I was practically totally non-speaking because it was just safer. And I guess you just kind of learn what some of the triggers are, and then doing the best to avoid those. But so much of it was really just trying to become invisible and make myself as less of a target as I possibly could. (Dylan)*

Discussions around the creation of a safe place also elicited reflections from children and young people on the availability of housing and the risk of homelessness. For some young people who participated in this study the inability to locate a physical space that was safe was the critical barrier to securing their safety. As two young people recounted:

> *It was really hard to find a place where I felt safe, because at the time we were also homeless. So, it was a horrible situation. I had no sense of belonging anywhere. (Samantha)*

> *I have removed myself. I have gone and lived somewhere else temporarily and looked for other accommodation. I've called homelessness services for myself. (Daisey)*

The links between safety and experiences of family violence have been documented elsewhere in Victoria. In 2021, Melbourne City Mission (MCM) released the Amplify report, which found that 45 per cent of the young women and 26 per cent of the young men who presented to the MCM state-wide youth homelessness access points cited family violence as their leading reason for seeking support (Corrie & Moore, 2021). More broadly, across Victoria (and indeed Australia) family violence is the leading cause of women's and children's homelessness (Council to Homeless Persons, 2022). The interviews clearly demonstrated that for young people experiencing homelessness, or any form of safe housing instability, there can be no consideration of wellbeing in that context.

Risk management and strategies between siblings

Several of the young people interviewed reflected on the importance of their sibling relationship(s) during their experience of family violence. When asked what would have helped them when they were younger, one participant explained simply, 'Not separating my siblings' (Alba). They went on to explain:

> *There were quite long periods where my sister was – we knew she was obviously not going to live at home but we just didn't know where she was and that was really – it was a lot, especially because we were very close. My sister helped raise all of us so in a way, she was like a mother figure and so it was really hard to figure out how to do things when she wasn't there. (Alba)*

The goal of securing safety for a younger sibling was mentioned frequently in at least three of the interviews, with one young person describing that they had 'protected and sheltered my brother from it [family violence] very fiercely' (Dylan). Different strategies were recounted by these young people, including one who had proactively shared her younger brother's details with key services in anticipation of the risk he faced living in the family home after she had left. She explained:

> *I feel like with my younger brother, it was hard, especially because when he was a minor … and also me living away from home, my own safety is really hard, especially when your siblings are there still in that environment. You do feel helpless because you're not a guardian and as well, I was young at the time so there wasn't really much I could do but the one thing that I thought that I could do was I went to DHS [Department of Human Services] and I made a report so they took down my younger brother's details with my mum's name so in case something did happen, they were aware of it or that I made a case about it and basically*

saying I wasn't sure if he was going to be safe. So, I was aware based off my own experiences of a services that could help so I did let them know. (Alba)

As part of these reflections, one young person questioned what might have happened to the younger sibling if they had been required to navigate the service system on their own – or more pertinently their experience of family violence. They reflected:

> *I think that my brother, who – I hate using this term, but by formal standards is considered moderately to severely intellectually disabled – and I think that if I weren't there, what would've happened to him? Because at the time, he was non-speaking and struggled a lot and still does in some ways to understand I guess what was happening in the home. I think all he really knew at the time and what he expresses to me now is that all he knows is that what was happening upset him and made him anxious and hurt him, and that he could see the rest of his family being hurt. But I think if I went there, that no one would've known that. (Dylan)*

The dynamics between children and young people and other members of their family in the context of family violence are largely underexplored in research engaging directly with young people. Where family violence has impacted the dynamics between siblings, the development of safe and supportive risk identification, assessment and safety planning practices will be critical to making sure the safety needs of both siblings are supported. As the experiences here demonstrate, this does not always necessitate a physical co-location of siblings when risk and safety needs differ, however, the bond between siblings must be considered, to support both short and long-term connection and recovery.

2. The invisibility of children and young people in system responses to family violence

> *It's just a nasty cycle where people who have the responsibility and accountability to help prevent it but don't for simple reasons. And obviously again, having services that actually look at helping children specifically instead of just having to need a parent or guardian because that alone can stop them from getting the help they need … What I'm trying to say is look broader than say if someone is physically hurt and there's signs of that. Look at the relationships, what is family life like at home, the environment? It's more than just the pain that's there. There's a lot more around that so I think that would be my answer, get more of a better understanding. (Alba)*

Throughout the interviews, children and young people consistently reflected on the ways in which they had felt invisible at different points of the system response to family violence. Tellingly, this invisibility was not specific to one particular point of the system. It was experienced and expressed differently by interview participants, but there was a shared impact they described – that is, children and young people overwhelmingly believed that system responses to family violence are neither designed nor carried out with children and young people in view. This was captured in the experience of one young person in this study:

> *So, as an eight-year-old who was going through a lot more than I probably realised, I didn't receive any support at all, probably because I wasn't able to speak up for myself. I, myself, actually had no idea what was going on. And it would have been really nice if someone had realised that I wasn't doing well, even just amongst schoolteachers and stuff. I was very, very clearly underweight. And I don't think any teacher bothered to mention it, or I think it was quite obvious that I was scared of my family. (Amira)*

Reflecting now as a young adult, Amira speaks here to her sense of absolute invisibility as an eight-year-old in the school system. Amira observed that while her understanding of what was happening at home was not obvious to her at the time, the outward symptoms of abuse and trauma she was displaying should have been an indication to her teachers. Another young person interviewed described a similar feeling of invisibility as a child victim-survivor navigating housing and justice systems; they explained:

> *We didn't really feel as if we were heard, I guess. Say, for instance, in the courts we were just referred to as 'the complainant', and 'the children'. We weren't even identified, really, as victims in our own right, which I think is an important thing for us, because oftentimes we felt unseen by, say, refuge or by police themselves. And that just compounds the problem. (Max)*

As previously noted, the reflections of the young people interviewed for this research likely include experiences that occurred prior to the implementation and impact of many of the reforms that followed the RCFV. The rollout of the Family Violence Information Sharing Scheme (FVISS), Child Information Sharing Scheme (CIS) and earlier phases of the MARAM reforms, guidance and assessment tools are likely to continue having a positive impact on the capacity of service providers to identify children's risk. Nevertheless, the present development of the new MARAM practice guidance and tools for working directly with children and young people represents a pivotal opportunity to reduce young victim-survivors' experiences of invisibility across the system.

Being listened to but not heard

The young people who disclosed family violence and interacted with one or many points of the service response system spoke about the distinction between being *listened to* by services and being *heard* by services. In describing their experiences disclosing violence and its related impacts, children and young people often reflected on the impacts of not being heard, including feeling invalidated, isolated and distrusting of the support options provided to them.

In response to the question, 'What wasn't good when you were trying to get help?', one young person recounted the feelings of invalidation they experienced while seeking help:

> *When people would interrupt. When I'm trying to explain the situation and try and explain the whole context of what I was going through at the time, people just jumping in, saying, 'Oh, this', and it actually wasn't that, like my story wasn't being fully heard and I wasn't able to explain my self completely … I got the impression … they know … They've heard this sort of thing before, my story isn't unique. But we – victim-survivors' stories are unique and they're completely different, and no one's is the same. It's almost invalidating … Being a victim-survivor, I don't see myself above other people, and don't see myself better than someone*

> *else, obviously. But it is invalidating, having someone pre-empt a story that I know better than anyone. (Samuel)*

Elaborating on a similar theme, another young person spoke about their feeling that services were interpreting what they were saying and imposing their own narrative rather than genuinely listening to them. They explained:

> *A lot of the times as well, what steered me away from services were they've asked the questions but then they would interpret what I was saying and they wouldn't clarify, they would just assume so as I was talking, they were building up their own case and assuming and even at the time, I could tell that, even though I didn't obviously have the language that I do for it now but at the time, I could tell that they weren't really listening to me. (Alba)*

For another young person, not being adequately listened to and heard made him distrustful of the support options subsequently provided to him (in this case medication), as well as feeling he was better off on his own, making his own decisions about what was needed to support his recovery. He reflected:

> *It's more on yourself to take control of who you are, and what you want to be. Because in my opinion, with my experience, professionals have just been like, 'Oh, okay.' and they're just sort of there to listen. And then – like they don't really pay attention to – they don't really keep notes, because they've got all these other clients. And then the doctors will just give you meds – the psychologists will just give you meds at the end of the day. I feel like it's more on yourself to take control of who you are, and what you want to be … In my opinion, I think it's best just to realise that no one else out there is really going to help you as you can help yourself. (Casper)*

A smaller number of participants spoke positively about the impact of being heard. These young people recounted what services did to make them feel heard; they also described the positive impacts of feeling visible. Demonstrations of genuine engagement often involved relatively simple gestures from the practitioner. For example, a practitioner's display of empathy broke the sense of isolation one young person experienced after feeling that she was being 'over-dramatic'. She explained:

> *I think what made me feel listened to was the fact that I had made up so many ideas in my head about the fact that people don't care that when I actually said something, and people listened, I was just shocked. It didn't matter how much I was being listened to, even just the slightest amount of empathy just had me shocked, because I didn't think I would ever get that or I thought I was being dramatic. (Amira)*

Another young person described being given the 'space to speak' as a positive point in their help-seeking journey:

> *So, in times where it has [made me feel heard], they've let me speak and then they've only needed to clarify when they feel like they haven't got everything or they want more or they need more to get the support that I need, so where the space has been made and I've felt like that, I've been given the space to speak. (Alba)*

In addition to sharing their positive and negative experiences of seeking a genuine listening ear, some of the children and young people also reflected on the value of specialisation to their being seen, heard, taken seriously and receiving support. For these children and young people, the provision of specialist support was important to addressing safety and wellbeing concerns following an experience of family violence. As two of the young people interviewed explained:

> *I think the most important thing is to first talk to someone that's actually from a domestic violence organisation because they will always take you very seriously. And when we had just*

moved out and we were couch surfing, my sister and I had called Orange Door. And they're a domestic violence organisation, and they thoroughly heard us out. And we were asking for legal advice. And they're just taking everything so seriously that it reassured us that we weren't being dramatic. (Amira)

When myself and my family engaged with the Orange Door, our primary concern at the time was safety and the perpetrator knowing where we lived. They offered funding to fund security cameras to be put up at the front of our house. I think that really helped us in that situation, to feel safe and secure and know that we're all protected. So that use of technology really helped. (Samuel)

These reflections offer valuable insights into how children and young people are experiencing supports provided through the Orange Door, a central feature of the reform agenda in Victoria following the RCFV (2016). While further research is needed to examine whether these two anecdotes are reflective of the broader experiences of children and young people accessing family violence supports via an Orange Door, it is certainly encouraging to receive positive examples of service provision in the post-RCFV family violence system.

Risk assessment as a tick box exercise

Interview participants' views on risk assessment and management practices were relevant to their reflections on their visibility at different points of the system. When carried out ineffectively, risk assessment and management practices can depersonalise a victim-survivor's interaction with a support service. Some of the study's participants have experienced being asked about their risk by a practitioner or frontline responder; in interviews, these children and young people often shared the view that this was not a genuine process, that they did not feel listened to – nor did they feel that their needs were acted upon following the risk assessment process. For some of the young people interviewed, this had the consequence of making them feel misunderstood, or that they did not fit or measure up as someone with a valid support need. As two young people explained:

It was just like complicated and hard to describe and she was like, 'Well who are you most scared of?' and trying to get me to choose one person which felt really yucky to me because I was like, 'It depends on the different timing and who I'm with,' and yeah it just felt like she didn't really understand what was going on for me and just wanted to kind of get the form done and not really focus on how I was feeling or anything like that … So after doing that form, it ended being too much and I was like, 'I don't feel like this person is listening, I don't feel like they're giving me enough time' and stuff like that, and I was like, 'I can't do this,' and she was like, 'Well you can always call back when you're ready,' and then hung up and it was none of the questions like 'are you safe right now? Are you feeling okay with your mental health and your wellbeing?' It was just 'well you can always call back when you're ready' but I was ready. (Rebecca)

So many services are really guilty of that because they have a checklist and at the end of the day, it's like, 'How do we help this person?' There's so many people that they're seeing and they're trying to basically see if you're going to fit their service and that's also really problematic because there's a reason why they're seeing your service. (Alba)

While this point was only made by a small number of young people interviewed, it goes to the heart of necessary considerations when embedding and rolling out the new MARAM practice guidance and tools for working directly with children and young people. Regardless of the strength of the evidence base of the tools and overall framework, it is critical that the process of undertaking a risk assessment with a child or young person represents a genuine opportunity for connection and the provision of individualised support and safety planning.

Children as an extension of their primary carer

> *"in terms of the year immediately after the family violence, it might have been better if someone had explained what was going on a bit more to me. If someone had actually talked to me like I was real person, not just an extension of my mum; as a little tag-along, if you will. (Jane)*

Numerous children and young people interviewed felt that they were often seen by practitioners and frontline responders as an extension of their primary carer – and that little consideration was given to how their risk profile and safety needs might differ from those of the primary carer adult, usually their mother. This echoes a concern common among Australian DFV stakeholders (and one raised during consultations to support development of the National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children): that the relative invisibility of children at different points of the system has meant that they are often responded to merely as an extension of their primary carer parent (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022c, pp.63-4). This is captured in the following two reflections:

> *I think a lot of the things that didn't help, especially with services was how a lot of those family violence services, they [take] the kids with the mum as a requirement … and it just pushed me away from getting help. So, services weren't really keeping kids in mind when I was needing to go and get help and as we all know doing this work, it still needs a lot more work done there but especially when I was experiencing it when I was younger. That was common. (Alba)*

> *The other biggest thing for me out of that as well is that any support or any services or supports that came out of the family violence court would kind of almost go from top down, where it would go through my mum first, which gave my mum all the control. And for me, that was pretty detrimental because my mum was very much about keeping up a façade. And so she rejected anything that was offered or given and was able to say, 'No, nothing's happening. Everything is fine.' And I guess her word just kind of just taken, because there was never any, 'Oh, well let's go talk to the rest of the family.' It was always – it started and stopped with my mum, very much so. (Dylan)*

Both young people quoted here believed that responding to children and young people solely as an extension of their primary carer denies that young person much needed supports and services. Dylan's comments in particular outline how a primary carer's own family violence-related needs may unintentionally block a young person's support needs from view. It is important to note here that we are not suggesting that primary carers, often mothers, are prioritising their needs or acting as gatekeepers to support services – rather, we want to emphasise that differences exist between the needs of the parent who is not using violence and the needs of the young people within that family. The provision of child-centred responses to children and young people – including embedding child- and young person-specific risk identification, assessment and management guidance and tools – provides a critical opportunity to ensure that risk assessment, supports and safety planning can be tailored to the needs of the individual child.

3. The importance of creating space for children and young people to safely disclose

> I think support at that age should really just look like checking up on that child. Making sure that the home environment is safe or whatever environment is safe. And reassuring them or giving them at least some environment that they feel loved in. And so that while they take their time to understand what's going on, at least they have a safe space. And then, if they have that safe space, they'll be able to talk to you. (Amira)

This research provides important insights into how children and young people would like to be asked about their experiences of family violence – and what the creation of a safe space to do so means from a young person's perspective. This section explores these findings by focusing on five key sub-themes: the challenges young people experienced when accessing support; the need for child-centred spaces across the system; the importance of authentic first points of contact; the need to validate young people's experiences of harm; and the importance of school-based interventions.

Challenges of accessing supports and navigating the system

Interviewees reflected on the outset of their help seeking journey. Many of the children and young people described the challenges of knowing what supports were available, how they could be accessed, and how to navigate engagement with different points of the system. These concerns reflect key findings from the Victorian RCFV (2016) regarding challenges faced by adult victim-survivors seeking help for family violence victimisation. Extending these concerns to the experiences of children and young people, one young person explained in detail:

> *I just think that the support systems while they exist, there hasn't been enough education around them, so people don't actually know how to access them, or they don't know that they exist. I for one, did not know any of the organisations that I have now accessed because I had no idea at all. And there's such a lack of knowledge and understanding of these things that it drives the fear that you have. And it drives that helplessness because you really think that you're on your own … literally any of the services I used, I didn't know they existed. And that frightens me because I was lucky enough to just by chance, figure my way out through those things … that's something that still shocks me. And I'm so grateful that everything just*

> *fell into place for me. But I do not know how other people who don't know these things exist – I just don't know how they do it because it's just so ridiculously hard. I've gone through so many organisations. I've received help from so many people. And it's upsetting to me that not everyone knows these things exist. (Amira)*

Services can be difficult to locate, or there can be limited awareness of their existence. Numerous young people interviewed viewed this as an indication that such services either didn't exist, due to a lack of need, or were simply not available to them. For some young people, this contributed to their sense of isolation. Reflecting on the need for greater support service awareness, one young person commented:

> *Awareness surrounding support services such as 1800 respect or kidshelpline etc. I think when I was younger, I just didn't have the awareness about these support services hence I didn't get the support I needed back then. Would be really good if schools provided numbers and specific things people could go to if experiencing these problems because it would have helped me out so much! (Caitlin)*

It is important to keep in mind that these reflections emerged among a sample of children and young people who have been recruited solely through specialist services and youth organisations. It is anticipated that a wider sample of children and young people would likely further highlight the navigation barriers to help-seeking for children experiencing family violence, particularly those young people who, consequently, have never made contact with a formal support service. As Victoria moves into the next phase of implementing and embedding the MARAM Framework to assess and mange family violence risk for children and young people – including through the use of the practice guidance and tools currently in development – there will be a critical need to ensure that the services and supports available across the state are readily accessible and promoted throughout communities. This will be particularly important in settings with high populations of children and young people.

The need for child-centred spaces across the system

Although their observations about physical spaces extends beyond the development and delivery of children- and young people-specific risk identification, assessment and management practices, the children and young people interviewed identified numerous points of the system where the spaces they inhabited were not child-centric and consequently were not conducive to feeling supported and safe. In particular, crisis accommodation services were identified by some interviewees as spaces largely designed and delivered with only adult victim-survivors in mind. A number of young people interviewed had experienced housing instability during and following their experience of family violence, thus numerous interviews featured discussions on the role that accommodation and housing had played in supporting their safety and wellbeing needs. As one interview participant reflected:

> *When we went into a refuge, I think it was a same-sex refuge, it was really, really just unwelcoming. We did not feel comfortable at all. I think there weren't enough beds for us. They didn't talk to us at all. We were just thrust in there. Mum had to sleep on the couch … it was a really uncomfortable environment. So I think that wasn't very good. (Max)*

Building on this, Max and his sister Jane (who was also interviewed for this research), provided an example of a space where they did feel seen as child victim-survivors in their own right. They explained:

> *I don't remember what the refuge was called, but the refuge that we went to, I remember these people that were there, they did something really nice and they asked me, 'What do you like?' And that was really nice, because nobody's ever really asked that. And they also gave us a list of stuff that we could do, so that we weren't just felt like a prison, just in a refuge. (Jane)*

> *… It was a stark difference to the refuges here. They spoke to us separately, and I think that they actually seemed to care, almost. It was that authenticity that really helped the case, I suppose. I think they gave us some items, and – like my sister said – they gave us a list of things that we could do to get our mind off things. Also, instead of putting us in a compound, if you will, with other people like us, they put us in a hotel with just normal people, so we felt like we could have some sense of normalcy – I think that's a word – which I think was good for the both of us, because we had quite a disrupted time, from fleeing, and from refuge to refuge. (Max)*

This reflection highlights the relatively small steps that housing services, as well as other points of the system, can take to provide positive indications to children and young people experiencing family violence – that they are welcome and considered – within a service system or support location. Given the well-established link between family violence and young people's experiences of homelessness (see, among others, Corrie & Moore, 2021; Council to Homeless Persons, 2022), there is a critical need to ensure that housing services are resourced to meet the needs of victim-survivors of *all* ages.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, police stations were also identified as spaces neither child-centred, nor safe for children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right.[2] The brother and sister interviewed had attended a police station to provide details about their experiences of family violence; they recounted their experience of the waiting room area they were put in by an officer:

It [the police station] was a really unwelcoming environment. We got placed in a room with other victims of – I think we got placed in a room with victims of sexual assaults, and there was just this kid by herself looking really scared. (Max)

… I had to wait, and while I was waiting there was these two kids – an older sister and a little brother, you could tell – and they came in with police officers, and I remember the boy seemed really scared. He looked around my age, or a bit older – I was seven at the time – and I remember the older sister also looking a bit concerned. And she said to her brother, 'It's going to be okay.' I still get upset about that, thinking about it. Like, no kid should have to go through that … I did not feel safe talking to the police, and they really haven't got a thing that makes us feel welcome. (Jane)

… We were essentially just thrust into a waiting room for multiple hours … with other victims of horrible things, who probably looked equally as scared as us … being thrust into waiting rooms with two hours of nothing to really do … I just remember I felt really uncomfortable while that was going on. The police just didn't really seem to care in the slightest. (Max)

[2] While it falls outside the scope of this report, it is notable that a number of the children and young people interviewed for this study described experiences with different points of the criminal justice system. Most commonly these experiences were with police, but a number of young people had also been through the family law, civil and/or criminal court system(s). Almost uniformly, children and young people described justice processes that had invisibilised them as victim-survivors in their own right, or that (they perceived) had heightened their risk. They felt disregarded by processes that were largely adult centric.

This exchange captures the impact on children and young people of being forced to inhabit spaces that were not designed with a trauma-informed or child-centred lens. While it is appreciated that a police station represents a punitive point of the system, it is not uncommon for children and young people to be in these settings. The insecurity experienced by young victim-survivors required to inhabit them highlights the critical need to reimagine all system spaces to cater to the age-specific needs of children and young people.

These experiences in a police and housing service setting provide valuable insights into the importance of the settings where children's risk assessment and management are carried out, and the spaces that child-centric support services are delivered. While there has been increasing acknowledgement at the national level in recent years on the need to improve how children and young people are responded to as victim-survivors in their own right (see, for example, DSS, 2022; Fitz-Gibbon et al, 2022b), the experiences of young people interviewed for this research demonstrate how mainstream spaces – such as police stations and refuges – could be improved in both design and practice to have a more positive impact on children and young people seeking support for family violence.

Authentic first points of contact

> *"I feel that patience and willingness is kind of the key, because more often than not … you get some professionals, it was kind of like the duty of the job, to actually help us, so they were obligated to help us. And it came across as they were kind of forced to help us, which in itself, yeah, I didn't really appreciate that … it just kind of left me thinking that I was better off figuring out the problem myself than seeking help, because I was troubling other people in a sense. So yeah, I feel that just being able to have patience. (Drew)*

Interview participants described the critical importance of an *authentic* first point of contact with the system, one that creates a safe space for children and young people to disclose their experience of family violence. Child Family Community Australia (CFCA), which offers practice guidance on responding to children and young people's disclosures, advise that such disclosures will often happen in a variety of ways, that they are 'seldom straightforward', that they may be 'indirect or accidental' (AIFS, 2022).

It is important to note at the outset of this section that, while several of the young people interviewed had clear preferences for how the first point of contact should be made, others were not certain what the most efficient way to ask about their safety and experiences of family violence would look like. As one young person explained:

> *I think it's more about watching for signs maybe, listening for signs and things like that. I think being too direct about that will get you shut down. I don't know a way to do it that would be efficient … It's a bit of a hard one because you can only really be direct, you can't be very indirect about asking that because it's very easy to brush it off and not answer the question if it's not being direct. But being direct can also be confronting, but I feel like you've got to be direct …. (Clare)*

This young person felt that both indirect and direct approaches can lead to an inauthentic response. Some young people explained that being too direct may be confronting and can result in the conversation being 'shut down'. Others felt that indirect questioning increased the risk of not providing an authentic response. One participant stressed that the personality type of the young person – a factor not within the control of the professional asking – can be pivotal in these early points of contact. In response to the question 'What is a good way to ask you about whether you have been hurt or if you are scared?', one young person explained:

> *I can be very articulate and a little bit too straight to the point. Like I would just say this is what's happening. But I know for a lot of other people they'll sort of not say things or beat*

> *around the bush or try to dip their toes in. But I can be very like, 'This is what's happening for me.' (Daisey)*

Specificity was viewed as important. A number of children and young people participating in this research indicated that simply asking 'how are you?' is insufficient. Instead, they suggested that opening with an observation about the young person might create an opportunity for them to disclose truthfully about their wellbeing. Interviewees suggested that it could be something like, 'I've noticed you haven't been coming to school'. It should involve letting the young person know that the respondent is genuinely concerned and wants to hear from the young person. As two young people told us, it is about creating a specific 'how are you?' type of question:

> *For me … probably not asking, 'How are you?' outright. I think that's a very generalised approach to asking someone how they are. I feel like if someone asked, 'Oh, how are your friendships going?', or, 'How do you feel at school?', or a specific 'How are you?' question is more easy for me to answer. I feel like when someone asks, 'How are you?', there are so many aspects to cover that I wouldn't know where to start. I feel like I find it difficult to find somewhere to start when someone asks me, 'How are you?' I'm inclined to say, 'Good.' Just, 'Good.' (Samuel)*

> *I think a good way to say that is, are you safe at the moment? I think the good thing about that is, it's quite broad. And it could be heard in any way. And it covers scared as well, I guess. (Amira)*

This view was reiterated by another young person interviewed:

> *I think when people say how are you, that's a good opening, but then otherwise a lot of people just say good, like that's standard even though they might not be good. (Daisey)*

For another young person, the best and safest strategy involved establishing a comfortable environment and using a direct approach:

> *If you actually want to get in depth about it you need to be in an environment that you're comfortable in, that you're not stressed or having anxiety or anything because obviously that can be a stressful conversation in itself, so you want to be as comfortable as you can, and then – you just have to be direct about it otherwise you're not going to get a direct answer. (Clare)*

In contrast to the direct approach favoured here, another young person described wanting to be engaged in a separate activity as a distraction first. He explained:

> *I would like to be asked while we're doing some other activity – Like, I don't know, for example, if there was like a group – This is probably a bad example, but probably like a group – Like there's like a game session – a video game session, where like the tutors come in and are checking on us, and stuff like that, because it kind of lowers our guard down, and makes us, in a sense, much more open. Because I feel that if you're just going to straight on ask a student, for example, how they're doing, they might be a bit more reserved. Whereas, if you kind of give them something else to do whilst kind of asking them, like surely then they might be more willing to open up with that information, rather than just like straight on asking. (Drew)*

On developing a setting where free and open communication can occur, children and young people stressed the importance of being given sufficient time to open up. This doesn't necessarily translate to multiple interactions, although it can. Allowing adequate time may translate to the exchange happening in the moment; it may be the case that the young person will need to be asked again at a later time, and/or the

question may need to be re-phrased or be different altogether. Young people emphasised that the process of establishing trust and facilitating a disclosure takes time and cannot be rushed. As two young people explained:

I think establishing relationships is really important for this to make sure that someone is safe. I know some circumstances and services, they might not have the resources to do that but it's really important that you do because, again, you're supposed to support the person to make sure that they're safe and building that relationship helps that organically, especially if there's a good relationship there. So, I think it's important to understand the dynamic, so looking more broadly than the immediate impact of what's happening. (Alba)

I think the biggest thing is for me … taking the time to build a sense of trust because in my experience – and I've talked to a few other people who've been in similar experiences – that a once-off check-in is never going to produce answers. And so there has to be something, some process of building and maintaining trust … I think for me personally, things were so bad at home that I don't think it would've taken overly long to do that with me, just because I wanted an out, just even more regular check-ins, not just the once-off. (Dylan)

While authenticity and persistence came through as very important in establishing an environment conductive to productive communication, the concept of care also emerged as critical. One of the young people interviewed spoke about how children experiencing family violence may adapt protective behaviours that act as a barrier to being open. As one young person explained:

> *It takes time because especially if you've been in family violence situations where … even if you're not okay you've had to pretend that you are okay because you have to keep other people's safety in mind and you have to think about other people. (Rebecca)*

Participants' reflections on the need to hide what is going on, or on feeling defensive when speaking with services, were reiterated throughout the interviews. One young person emphasised the need for subtlety when enquiring after wellbeing, noting that children and young people might divulge information slowly to avoid feeling exposed. He explained:

> *I mean, the person who's being asked, their defensive mechanisms might pop up, and then they might try to avoid it as much as possible. So, through subtlety, you can probably extract bits of information at a time … Like, it's not like literally like ripping off the band-aid, but rather just like peeling it off slowly. Yeah, because when it comes to such sensitive matters such as this, I think ripping off the band-aid is not a great approach. (Drew)*

Another interview participant used the words patience and willingness and spoke about some of their own experiences involving workers who appeared to be merely fulfilling a duty or an obligation. The need for adults to show patience emerged across the interviews, with one young person commenting:

> *Just to say, 'I'm there for you.' And to say something like, 'Oh, I've been there before, I know what you're going through. If you ever need someone to talk to, I'm here for you.' Just keep it sort of like a short question that they don't need to answer, but then if they feel like they can open up to you later, whenever that may be – then they can. (Casper)*

This point was reiterated, with another participant saying that sometimes she felt social workers were 'trying to get it over with quickly' (Kara), while another young person described the importance of taking time to establish trust and rapport:

> *I know that for some people, that's not what they would want to hear. I think sometimes more than asking how your physical wellbeing or mental wellbeing is going, the better thing to do is to just have a close bond with that person, so you have that relationship. (Amira)*

While this research demonstrates variations among young people's opinions regarding direct versus indirect approaches in initial service contact, all participants felt that approaches should be genuine and not rushed, and that they should aim to show a sense of care.

Validating young people's experiences of harm

> *I didn't quite realise how important it would be for me to even just hear someone say, 'I believe you,' for my – just in general. It feels like a weight has kind of been lifted. (Dylan)*

Closely associated with children and young people's reflections of what constitutes an authentic first point of contact were their views on the need to ensure that when a young person discloses family violence they are met with a response that validates the harms they have experienced. For the children and young people interviewed in this study, the importance of validation was a shared view. However, their own experiences of responses to their disclosures were mixed. The following comments from two participants are particularly relevant to the importance of validating a young person's experience of harm. They were responses to questions about how people should respond to a young person's disclosure of family violence and how practitioners should ask about mental health and physical health:

> *Being heard and being told it's not okay and it shouldn't be like this and no one should be experiencing this. So first of all, validating how they're feeling. And then I guess there's the emotional side and there's also the help that you need. (Daisey)*

> *It was really hard to – you had one person saying to you, 'It's all valid. The grief you're going through is all valid' and you had one person go, 'That didn't happen to you. What are you talking about?'. It was quite a hard time. (Samantha)*

Practitioners not minimising experiences of harm described by young people was viewed by children and young people interviewed as critical to receiving validation at the point of disclosing. As two young people recounted:

> *Sometimes I felt a little bit – like some workers were a bit desensitised, so they sort of like – they hear the worst of the worst. And for me, this was the worst thing that I had ever gone through, but for them, they're like, 'Oh yeah, but I talked to someone yesterday that experienced a lot worse.' Like they didn't say that to me, but I could feel like they felt like it wasn't that bad … they hear it every day. They hear stories. But for me, this is real, and this is what I'm going through. So I think having that sensitivity I think is important. (Daisey)*

> *When I brought up issues, serious concerns about my wellbeing and safety, they essentially just downplayed it. It didn't really feel right at all. I thought, 'Okay, well I can bring my concerns to you,' and they basically just brushed it off. (Max)*

Numerous young people described the characteristics of validation, emphasising the importance of empathy and the need for practitioners not to judge the situation or experience. As three young people explained:

It's kind of common sense. But I guess it's not for everyone. There just shouldn't be any sort of judgment, or she's being an attention seeker or any of this. Even if you do think those things, do your absolute best to keep it to yourself, because at the end of the day, you literally never know what that other person has gone through. And even if they're faking it, there's probably a reason why they've made up such an extravagant story, that kind of stuff doesn't come out of nowhere. I really just think it's about putting your own thoughts to the side for a second and just being there for that person. (Amira)

I remember 2-3 counsellors who were very empathetic and understanding of my situation and helped me to ground myself and not blame myself for the experiences I've had. (Caitlin)

I think the biggest thing is just understanding and having that safe space, or some form of unconditional love. A lot of people that come through environments like I've come from, it's like that constant thing of feeling unloved, or unwanted or unworthy. And because of that, you constantly need validation from others. And I think the best way to combat that is by having multiple sources of unconditional love. So, you don't even need that validation, because it's just like, they just love me for who I am. Clearly, I must be completely fine. (Amira)

For other young people interviewed, the action taken by the individual receiving the disclosure was seen as critical to validation. For example, two of the young people interviewed said that when a family violence disclosure is followed by inaction, this sends a strong message to the young person that their experience of harm has not been believed and taken seriously. They commented:

When they're telling you that someone's doing something to them or not doing something that they should be in a guardian role it needs to be fucking listened to, it needs to be taken seriously. And I think that doesn't just go to teachers or whatever, any fucking adult. Not everyone's a mandated reporter, but as adults, it's a child, it's a child, how can you not do something? (Clare)

I think from systems, like school and the police and DHHS, probably – I don't know if 'denial' is quite the right term, but they really challenge you on it and – or at least in my experience, they really challenge me on it. And even when they did know or had really solid evidence, there was always some excuse for action to not be taken. (Dylan)

These reflections provide valuable insights into how conversations with children and young people about family violence risk must occur if they are to establish supportive and safe spaces for future disclosure and impart validation for the victim-survivor. These reflections also highlight why risk assessment itself should not be viewed as the end point of the engagement with the child or young person. The next step of risk management is critical. The experiences of the children and young people in this study demonstrates the ways in which safety plans were often 'watered down'.

The importance of school-based intervention

Throughout the interviews, children and young people recounted a range of positive and negative experiences of disclosing family violence at school, or of having their risk of family violence identified by an educator. This suggests that educators and others working in the education system, including school psychologists and wellbeing officers, will have a key role to play in directly engaging with children and young

people to identify, assess and manage family violence risk and wellbeing, using new MARAM guidance and tools.

As the stories of young people presented throughout this report demonstrate, the school system has not always been successful in identifying and responding to children's risk of family violence. It is not possible within the scope of this study to know the full detail of individual circumstances, most specifically whether reports were made under mandatory reporting obligations but went no further. It is clear, however, that the young people who told us these stories often recounted a shared experience of limited or no support being provided. Whether it was about presenting with signs of abuse that went unnoticed or entrusting an educator with details of abuse (only to find the school system not intervening or following up with them), the experiences shared throughout the interviews demonstrated the significant work needed to ensure that people working within education systems are equipped to respond effectively to young people's help-seeking behaviours.

For example, one young person interviewed recounted repeatedly disclosing the details of the abuse they experienced to educators at school. Not only was no action taken, but the school also failed to 'close the loop' with the young person by informing them what happened with the information they shared. There were also no alternative sources of support provided to the young person. As they explained:

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

Not all participants described negative experiences of seeking support at school. Some of the young people interviewed did share positive experiences of school intervention and support. The proactive steps taken by a school-based wellbeing coordinator were provided by one young person as an example of a helpful reply received after a disclosure of family violence. They explained:

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

Other young people described similar positive experiences of receiving proactive supports through school:

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

My school did a really good job informing me about how my experience (sexual assault) was a form of child abuse and I think they approached my situation very well – as well as referring me to CASA (the right support service) and helping me to adjust my study timetable because they knew what was going on. (Caitlin)

While several reflections presented in this report speak to the work yet to be done, these examples of positive school-based interventions speak to the vast expertise that already exists in some schools and among some educators in Victoria. They highlight the points at which foundations are already in place to further support reform implementation and change management.

Although not directly related to school-based early interventions, a number of children and young people interviewed offered reflections on fraught experiences at school. Several young people described experiences of feeling judged for school absenteeism (often related to their experience of family violence) or experiences of school bullying. They described behaviour that they understand, in hindsight, was a reaction to the abuse they experienced. As one young person commented:

I didn't really get much support through school. Not really. I missed out on a lot of school, because of domestic violence, and that ended up turning into bullying. And the school wasn't really supporting us, and they didn't really care that we were missing out on school. (Jane)

For these participants, these feelings and experiences added another layer of anxiety. School could have represented a place of escape for them, where the caring and respectful relationships cultivated with teachers were very important to them. Instead, it was another location of insecurity. As two young people recounted:

Speaking from a school perspective, where yes, they were quite supportive. There were some instances where I felt like there was a lack of understanding or they were understanding. But maybe this is just me projecting my own insecurities. But I felt a little bit judged, or having a bad attendance and not showing up to school as regularly. I started to really feel what my teachers were thinking. And I know that's a bit ridiculous, because they really do love me a lot and they care about me. (Amira)

The school wasn't very supportive with understanding that sometimes going to class was just overwhelming. I needed time to just be there by myself and work through things. Because life still had to go on. Like I said, we didn't have a sense of belonging, so school was really my only place where that was my – I can take a breath now and know I don't have to stress about things. I wish I had more support in the sense that people would just check in and go, 'Hey, how are you feeling today?' 'Actually, I'm not OK.' And that was really hard to say at the time … (Samantha)

This range of school-based experiences among the sample of children and young people interviewed demonstrates why effective engagement with those working within the education system will be vital to continued implementation of MARAM, including the new practice guidance and tools in development. As the reflections and stories recounted in this section and throughout the report show, there are both failings to address and successes to build on in implementing MARAM in these settings.

4. Improving system responses

> When I was younger. I think being a little bit more heard and understood. I feel like I've carried that hurt with me, and I'm only just dealing with it in counselling now and still scared to unpack it all because it was a lot. I think having that support to unpack it all earlier and start dealing with it would've changed who I am now, I think, as a person. So I think being a bit more heard and having that support to work through it would've been helpful. (Daisey)

This quote, on what would have helped the process of seeking support, captures a clear recognition among some children and young people interviewed of the need to embed trauma-informed responses across the system for young victim-survivors. All children and young people interviewed were asked questions relating to what worked well for them when seeking help, what didn't work well, and what supports they would have liked to receive. In presenting the findings from these questions, the following section examines three crucial areas: the importance of giving children agency over their safety planning and decision-making; the value of individualised responses; and the importance of age-appropriate supports.

Aligning with the findings of state-based reviews of family violence practices and with research conducted with adult victim-survivors of family violence, young people interviewed for this study lamented having to tell and retell their story at different points of the system. As one young person explained:

> *I am one of those people that I don't really mind telling my story. It doesn't bother me however many times I have to say it. But it does get to a point where you're saying it for the 15th time and it's starting to get draining because it's just like, oh my God. And then you start leaving out details, because you've said it so many times that you're starting to forget. (Amira)*

A trauma-informed systems response requires that the number of different points at which young people are required to share the details of their experience be as low as possible. Several key reforms emerging from the RCFV (2016) sought to address this issue among adult victim-survivors – including through the FVISS, CISS and MARAM Framework. Sustained additional effort will be critical to addressing the increase in risk identification, assessment and management practice engaging children and young people – and to minimising points of traumatisation wherever possible.

Giving children agency over their safety planning and decision-making

> *They didn't really ask for our input at all, which I think that was a really big thing, because we had – with the family violence, control had been taken away from our lives. We basically were just … stepping on eggshells. And giving that control back to the child is really important and really validating for them, especially when they've spent multiple years in that environment where they've got no control over their lives. (Max)*

Throughout the interviews, children and young people reflected on the importance of agency in the safety planning and risk management process. For many of the young people interviewed, their childhoods were characterised by periods of lost control, and more specifically, times where they felt that adults had taken away control of their safety and independence. Children and young people were extremely critical of system processes that replicate that loss of control. With this in mind, the design of the Child and Young Person Victim Survivor focused-MARAM practice guidance should incorporate opportunities to actively engage the young person in risk assessment and safety planning processes. The conversation elicited should be dynamic and supportive of the agency of the young victim-survivor involved wherever possible.

To aid in understanding the different strategies that young people employ to keep themselves safe, all children and young people interviewed were asked what they did during their experience of family violence to maintain or improve their safety and wellbeing. Young people responded with examples of a range of different activities and strategies they use to feel better when they are stressed, worried or scared. These included:

> *For me, it's like exercising … I need that fresh air, that movement. It really helps to calm me down, especially when I'm stressed, I do realise I have a lot of pent-up energy or energy that I need to just shed by exercising for me and obviously with my body and my illnesses, cycling has been the best way and I've actually found a way that I love. For me, exercising was just always a horrible experience, hated it but I found a way that works for me and there's different types of ways to exercise, whatever that looks like. (Alba)*

> *Usually I'll just go outside and have a smoke, and try and gather myself more mentally than physically – and just trying to understand what's going on, and where I'm at in more of a mental and physical state. And then just deciding what to do, or what to say from then on out for that situation that I would be in. (Casper)*

> *I have a bath. I love having a bath. Going to places that I want to go to that I haven't been before like a different beach or something or just finding small things to do that you wouldn't typically do in your day. It doesn't have to be huge but it could be special because it's not your routine. I don't know, painting your nails can be therapeutic because it makes you focus. I like doing that. I'm not good at it but I like doing it. (Clare)*

> *Listen to music … or do breathing exercises. (Harriet)*

> *Physically, I've recently started exercising, and given that – after the end of the long lockdowns, I started to go back and to try and get myself healthy as well. (Drew)*

While many of these activities may be viewed as relatively straightforward, the enthusiasm with which these examples were offered by young people during the interviews revealed the positive effect they had on the

young person's wellbeing during times of insecurity and threat. Another young person described the benefits of journaling:

> *As human beings, we tend to remember negative experiences more than positive ones (just to protect yourself) and especially for those who have experienced trauma or something, keeping a journal of things you are grateful for or something good that has happened during the day has/can also open up a neural pathway to strengthen certain (more positive memories) and help a person recover and just feel better about certain situations. I also think personal development and adjusting my mindset towards certain situations (mixed with my spirituality) has definitely helped with my healing process, alongside with counselling and being educated about the psychology behind my behaviour helped me to develop tools and strategies to cope with different situations and build resilience. (Caitlin)*

Additionally, for several children and young people within this study, part of the need for children to have agency over their safety planning is to ensure that any system responses do not conflict with or override their own safety-planning strategies. We note, however, that giving children and young people agency over their safety planning and decision making does not mean handing them responsibility to navigate the service system and referral pathways on their own. In contrast, some young people interviewed spoke about the value of practitioners who facilitated system navigation for them. As two young people explained:

> *I think what worked really well was that they understood that I had a lot going on. So, they tried as much as possible to make my process not complicated. I [don't know if I] worded that very correctly. For instance, I contacted an organisation called Headspace, when I initially needed help. And the person that did the intake there, she literally handled everything that I could possibly have imagined. And she got me in contact with other organisations. And I literally just sat back and took time to myself to process everything that had just happened. And just collect everything. And she did all of the work for me and all the communication. (Amira)*

> *When I started receiving support, my housing social worker was incredible. I think – and taking those steps forward – it was so hard, but taking those steps forward and applying for rentals and deciding to get that ball rolling was really empowering. And I felt heard and validated that this is a situation that I need to be in for me and my son, and it's not safe and it's not right. (Daisey)*

These comments from participants emphasising agency in safety planning link back to the earlier analysis of the complexity of the system and the challenges that children and young people can face in first accessing supports. They indicate the need for practitioners, wherever possible, to balance facilitating and supporting systems access with ensuring agency.

The value of individualised responses

> *I would really like to stress the fact that children, when they're being talked to about what they've experienced, they can't be – it's not like a 'one size fits all' thing. Each child is different. (Max)*

The interviews revealed the need for individualised supports for children and young people experiencing family violence. There was significant variance in the experiences and safety needs of the children and young people interviewed for this study, but there was a clear recognition among them of the value of tailored supports. As one young person succinctly explained:

> *I think each person's different. Not the one-person approach to everything, because it's not going to work for every person. (Samantha)*

Across the interviews, participants identified a wide range of effective therapeutic supports. Differences in the desired supports they described demonstrate the importance of tailoring to the individualised needs of the victim-survivor. We need to move away from assuming that what works for one individual can be transferred to another individual in a similar circumstance. This is captured in the following reflections:

> *I think for me, at least with the therapist that I really liked, she would find materials that I could take home with me, so for example with anxiety and unhelpful thinking styles, she had this bit of – she found it from a website, people that had drawings to unhelpful thinking styles like black and white and grey or catastrophising so everything is doom and gloom and I'm like, 'One, why have you got to call me out like that? But two, if I had something physical,' I think she realised before I did that and she'd ask me these questions to, to get to know me in the process of that … So, she would give me physical things that I could look at in between our therapy sessions so that I was constantly investing – obviously, it took me a while to work on the homework aspect but it was helpful to have something to look at so that's what really helped for me. (Alba)*

> *It was just like, we we'd have form groups and be they'd be like, 'today's focus is wellbeing. Here are some colouring pencils and colour the diary.' But there was no actual like, just take a deep breath and take a moment to yourself and just really indulge in the moment. Just let go of everything else. There was none of that. It was just like, just colour and everything will be okay. And I think that there was a sense of betrayal that you've spent an hour colouring, but you feel the same. And there was also no regard to what some people might think is awesome, like colouring, other people might feel anxious from it because they're like, 'Oh, I'm colouring out of the line.' I know for a fact that I feel really anxious when I colour, because it needs to look perfect. And then when it doesn't, I'm like, 'Oh, it's all wrong!' So, there was like this cookie cutter image that the school had set for wellbeing, because they were trying to include it. And I don't think it was very helpful. But in saying that, there has definitely been a lot of progress over the past few years on how everyone in general sees wellbeing. (Amira)*

A number of the children and young people interviewed reflected on the importance of recognising that their safety and support needs differed at times from their siblings. This links back to an earlier analysis that system processes and practices should support the provision of individualised safety plans.

The importance of age-appropriate supports

In addition to recognising the value of individualised supports, numerous children and young people interviewed discussed the need for age-appropriate supports. Rather than basing any assessment on a 'textbook age', however, the allocation of supports should be made according to the individual's needs as gleaned from interactions with them. As one young person explained:

> *I think to a degree depending on their age, but people mature at different rates, people go through different things, so you've got to tailor it to an individual person, not just by a textbook age. You need to be diverse, and it's hard for any person to just face whatever comes to them. (Clare)*

Other young people interviewed similarly emphasised the importance of recognising differences in age and the need for age-appropriate supports. One young person commented:

> *I guess it depends, there's obviously different stages of my life … I like being asked these questions outright but I think for me when I was younger, I think it's just more of getting to know me first. (Alba)*

Reflecting on the difference between her own support needs and those of her older sister, another young person reflected on how the impact of abuse and violence can create specific needs as young people grow older. For this young person, growing into young adulthood provided her with a sense of certainty and agency, while for her sister, aging had brought concerns around lost time and fears about the future. As she articulated:

As a teenager now, for me, it's like I have that voice and I can tell people exactly what's going on. I can go out and get those services for myself. And again, I still need safe spaces, but it's easier for myself to navigate those spaces and decide who is a good person for that. And then, the discussions I have are so much more open. I'm so much more aware of what's going on. And then on the other hand, there's my 29-year-old sister. And support for her looks different too, because she's at this stage where she's having a midlife crisis, even though she's not even midlife … she needs to be reassured that whatever has happened up until now won't affect the rest of her life or her life hasn't been diminished by 30 years of whatever she's gone through and that she still has time to live. Whereas for a teenager, you're still a kid. You still have an entire life. You're fine. It really depends what your age is, on what kind of response or support you're receiving. (Amira)

One aspect of providing age-appropriate supports – as identified by several children and young people interviewed – relates to the importance of language, specifically of not misapprehending a child's understanding of their experience due to their inability to communicate it articulately. As one young person explained:

> *Language is super important … that's another assumption, because children don't have the language or can express the way adults do, they just assume that they don't know what's going on. They do, they just don't have the language to communicate that to you but I feel like as well, your approaches should be different in terms of maybe the way that you engage … So, looking at different ways to communicate or talk about it, especially if they have a disability, accessibility is another one as well. (Alba)*

The following three reflections, thematically consistent with Alba's, speak to the importance of language and, in particular, the role of language as a barrier. These reflections highlight a variety of approaches that may be effective when working with young children. Responses for younger children may need to take into account the need for accessible language (including the use of age-appropriate or 'child-friendly' language), as well as techniques for communicating with children and young people who are neurodivergent and who may have disability. Further, and as explored later in this report, responses may need to have an educative function (to ensure young people understand that abuse is wrong) and be trauma informed. There can be significant language barriers, combined with general reluctance from children and young people, that professionals must overcome when instigating and providing ongoing support. As one participant commented:

> *With youth, they're more reluctant in a way to seek help. So, you take a look at all these complicated words, and you're like, 'Oh no, I can't really be bothered knowing what those words mean.' So, they either choose to go ahead with it, or if they're the more cautious type, they might choose to back out of it entirely. (Drew)*

For another young person interviewed, difficulties related to communication were connected with the 'unresolved emotion' she was experiencing; her comments suggest that talking was too painful and upsetting at that point in her life. She explained:

> *I don't think I was equipped with the skill to talk to people effectively. Maybe I probably had a lot of unresolved emotion that prevented me to effectively communicate, and now I am fine. I can talk without feeling too sad or feeling angry or anything like that, whereas when I was younger it wasn't like that, and it probably was because I didn't talk in the first place. (Clare)*

Another young person interviewed spoke to how crucial accessible language is for breaking through communication barriers and creating space for disclosures. Reflecting on challenges experienced by their young brother, who was largely mute during childhood, this young person explained:

> *Like so many young people are ignored even when they have an oral voice that him not having – not being able to speak is that no one ever would have asked him the question, and no one ever would have even bothered to go to him. And no one has ever bothered to go to him. And he's four years younger than me and my mum says a lot. He wouldn't have remembered anything, but he remembers … I could talk about it for hours, but just my biggest gripe, I suppose, is the amount of young people with disabilities across the board, but it's particularly developmental and intellectual disabilities, and then even more so if they have communication differences, is that there is so much abuse that goes unheard of. And when it is brought up, there is no value given to the voice of the young disabled person. (Dylan)*

Another aspect of providing age-appropriate supports, particularly when responding to first disclosures by young children, is making sure that the response does not simplistically categorise family members into victim-survivor and perpetrator categories. Such a response, young people explained, can deter future help seeking. As one young person reflected:

> *When I was nine – eight years old, I think I tried contacting Kids HelpLine through the web chat. And as an eight-year-old, I didn't want to hear the things that they were telling me. So, I was like, my dad's threatening me if I don't study or whatever … I think from the eyes of an eight-year-old, I really idolised my dad. And I was like, whatever he's doing, he's doing it for the better of me and he has my best interest in mind. But what I was being told was like, maybe you should get the police involved. Your dad sounds like a bad person, or that's at least how it was coming across to me. So, I just got really defensive and just closed it because that's not what I wanted to hear. I just wanted to hear like, it's okay. It'll get better with time. You can contact us again, if you you're not safe or if you need help. Here's some ways to cope with how you're feeling right now rather than, your dad's a bad man or whatever. But then again, I do think it depends on what age you are, or what kind of situation you're in. So, that was definitely one experience that steered me away a little bit. (Amira)*

Another point raised by several young people was around using specialist language such as the term 'perpetrator'. It was noted that this language may be confusing for a young person who does not identify roles in a binary perpetrator and victim-survivor categorisation. Additionally, the use of such language may not accurately reflect how the violence can make its way to children and young people through different family members. For example, the father may be hurting the mother out of eyesight, but the brother may be using violence against the sister. Young people interviewed noted that the use of perpetrator language can act as a barrier to children and young people disclosing the full dynamics of abuse within their home environment.

A number of participants emphasised the importance of education and of ensuring that children and young people understand that abusive behaviours are not normal. Australian research has recently documented

the high co-occurrence of experiences of domestic and family violence among children and young people who go on to use violence in the home, highlighting the significant intergenerational impacts of growing up in abusive family settings (Fitz-Gibbon, Meyer, Boxall, Maher and Roberts, 2022a, 2022b). Young people in this study discussed the need to disrupt this cycle and ensure that children and young people receive education to understand that violence is not normal. As two young people commented:

> *When you're small, you're idealising your parents. So, that's the last thing you want to happen to them. You just think that they're having bad days, or you justify their behaviour. (Amira)*

> *I feel like if we did know better what it was we'd know more what to look out with our friends or colleagues or whatever as well, if someone else is going through that. (Clare)*

For another young person interviewed, the provision of family violence related education at school was one key thing that could have helped them feel less isolated in their experience. They explained:

> *I think what they could do to make us safe faster is make us feel like we're not aliens to society, and that we're just the odd one out in society. Because that's how I felt a lot. I would think that I was the only person who had been through this. And I think it would have been better if they kind of made us feel like we weren't the odd one out. (Max)*

These observations reiterate the crucial significance of education settings as sites of primary prevention and early intervention. They also indicate the importance of the educative function in support responses to children and young people experiencing family violence. Practitioners can balance practice approaches to engage in ways that recognises variations in children's understanding and their manner of speaking about violence (in the way suggested above) without normalising or excusing the violence.

A further challenge raised by participants is balancing the provision of support to children and young people within a practice that does not undermine young people's sense of agency and self-respect. As one young person commented:

> *When someone was trying to support me and they'd actually speak to me like an adult or like a person instead of like a fucking child, and yeah, just treated me with humility, humanity – words. Just yeah, not treating me like a child … when you're younger or a child you don't know that you're a child to be spoken down to like that. You're your own person and then someone comes and speaks to you like a child or like an idiot you feel like you're not being heard, whereas if you speak to them like an adult or a fucking person, just a person, it's more, I don't know, you feel more understood … And then you feel listened to and you feel respected, and if you feel like someone's respecting you, you're going to be more likely to talk to them … even though being a teenager, you kind of are a child, fucking childish, but just being straight up about it, again being direct. And when it comes from an adult like a teacher or someone with that authority figure you do take it more seriously, you do take it on board, especially if it's a teacher or someone that you get along with and trust … (Clare)*

These findings mirror earlier research led by the Australian Catholic University (ACU, 2015-2017) on children and young people's safety in organisational contexts; it found that the type of support children and young people want when feeling unsafe differs and can be age specific (AIFS, 2021; ACU, 2022; Russell & Higgins, 2020, 2021). The Children and Young People's Safety Project was designed to hear the voices of children and young people as well as to provide guidance for organisational leaders to 'improve safety culture' (AIFS 2021). Children and young people were asked to report on what their safety needs would be if they were to find themselves in an unsafe situation with 1) an adult and 2) a peer. The findings pointed to diversity in children and young people's responses, determined both by age and whether the unsafe behaviour originated from a peer or an adult (AIFS, 2022). When reflecting on unsafe situations with adults, the study found, younger children expressed a slightly higher preference for a trusted adult's support than that of older children (AIFS, 2022). When it came to unsafe situations with peers, children and young people again indicated the availability of trusted adults as a key support – however, and significantly, children and young people also indicated that they wanted 'the adults around them to notice when they might be unsafe and step in' (AIFS, 2022).

5. Young people's experiences of mandatory reporting requirements

Several of the children and young people interviewed had been advised of legislated mandatory reporting requirements at different points in their experience. In Victoria, mandatory reporting requirements are legislated under the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic). The following professions are designated as mandatory reporters in Victoria: registered medical practitioners, nurses, midwives, registered teachers and early childhood teachers, school principals, school counsellors, police officers, out of home care workers (excluding voluntary foster and kinship carers), early childhood workers, youth justice workers, registered psychologists and people in religious ministry. Designated mandatory reporters are required under the legislation to make a report to Child Protection if in the course of carrying out their job, 'they form a belief on reasonable grounds that a child is in need of protection from physical injury or sexual abuse'. Mandatory reporters need to make their report to child protection as soon as practicable and must make additional reports if their belief is substantiated by 'further reasonable grounds'. Following a report, Child Protection will make a decision about follow up; they may progress the matter to investigation, refer the family to

community support services or take no further action. It is noted that in consideration of all of the above, Child Protection will act in the 'best interests of the child'.[3]

While it was not within the scope of this study to examine the impacts of mandatory reporting, we do note that the process through which young people are advised of this requirement to report is important, both in terms of their willingness to engage with the system and to feel supported by those working within it. As one young person explained:

> *So I think it's just understanding that we need that kind of preparation and knowing how to look after ourselves during that and that a worker just gets to go home to their lives but that's just one decision in their day that they probably have to make all the time and it probably wouldn't really bother them too much but to that person that's a really big thing and especially in family violence situations where it could potentially be more risky. So, I just think that it's not that it doesn't need to happen, it's just that there needs to be a bit more planning and conversation and letting people know what's going to happen and those conversations. (Rebecca)*

Some children and young people are aware of the distinction between mandatory reporting to Child Protection and other organisational requirements to report certain types of disclosures to parents or carers. The understanding of what constituted mandatory reporting varied across the interviews. The themes that emerged from children and young people's stories around compulsory reporting without their consent were consistent, irrespective of whether the report was made to a parent or to Child Protection. The key themes that emerged on this topic included:

- views surrounding how the warning relating to mandatory reporting was communicated,
- the need to allow a child or young person time to prepare in the event that a report is going to be made, and
- the perceived failure of mandatory reporting systems.

Among the young people interviewed for this study, clear themes emerged around how the warning relating to mandatory reporting was communicated. The first is the desire of children and young people for transparency in this process. While the young people we spoke to acknowledged the need for compulsory or mandatory reporting to parents or authorities, they reflected on how the difficulties inherent in these processes could be eased by openness and honesty from practitioners. The second theme, clearly connected to the first and indicated in Rebecca's quote above, is the need for preparation in the event that a report is going to be made. Children and young people emphasised how essential it is that they be given time to prepare for their physical and mental safety prior to returning home. The young people in this study provided examples of instances where trusted adults, including school counsellors, had contacted a parent to disclose information. In these examples the young people recollected being advised by workers that they would give the young people forewarning if they planned to speak to anyone else – and then this promise was broken. The outcome for those who spoke about this was that they did not have time to prepare and were caught off-guard by the consequences of reporting. As one young person reflected:

> *Something that comes to mind that really didn't help was at school, the school psychologist. The school got involved in my mental health and stuff like that. They called up my mum. At the time, when you're 14, you're kind of, like, 'Why are you calling my mum? You shouldn't do that.' And as you get older you understand that they have to. But, I think it was just the way they went about it. It was the lack of transparency that was going on. So, to my face she said that she wouldn't call my mum and then I came in after lunch to talk to her and she's, like, 'OK, so I've called your mum.' That was one example. And then I had to go home with that, the consequences of that. They didn't check, even though I said it's not safe for you to*

[3] The language used in this paragraph is taken from the Victorian Government, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing webpage on the legal requirements of mandatory reporting under the Children Youth and Families Act 2005.

tell my mum this kind of stuff. And I had to go home and I had to deal with the consequences of that, of my mum's anger, but they had called her about it. (Kara)

Another young person recounted a similar story:

Yeah I remember my psychologist, it wasn't my family violence worker but my psychologist … she said to me at the start, she was like, 'If you tell me anything,' you know the usual thing, 'If you tell me anything, if you're going to hurt yourself or hurt others then I have to let someone know,' but she said, 'If I have to do that, I'll talk to you about it first, I'll talk to you about it first,' yeah she said that, 'Like where I can, I'll talk to you about it first,' and I was like, 'Okay, fair enough.' So I told her something and she could have said at that time, 'That's a bit concerning, I have to tell someone,' but she didn't and then I left and then obviously a call had been made and I didn't get any preparation or any safety planning or any mental health planning as well, like 'how are you going to manage your mental health and how are you feeling about this' and then got home and yeah obviously something had been, someone had told something. (Rebecca)

In addition to these themes, a third emerged concerning the failure of mandatory reporting systems. Some of our research participants indicated their belief that opportunities for intervention were missed by adults in a position to report. For these participants, there was a mixture of resentment and sadness related to these system oversights. One young person, for example, who had been in an abusive intimate partner relationship during her school years, stated very clearly that she felt the system failed her and that a teacher should have reported. She explained:

Actually, just fucking action it and doing your job. Teachers are mandated reporters, why are they not doing that? Like I said I don't know what the process for that is. And maybe if they did that it wouldn't have stopped the relationship, it wouldn't have stopped what was happening, but now I feel failed, whereas had someone actually done the right thing I'd feel a little bit more closure, because now it's like I was a child, why didn't these adults who were supposed to help me help me? You feel failed. But had they done their job properly or done what a caring person would do I guess you'd have more closure … it probably wouldn't have stopped what was going on, but it should've been the right thing to do. And no one did that. No one did that. (Clare)

Another young person similarly reflected that she wished her teachers or counsellors had picked up on what she was trying to communicate to them:

I experienced family violence growing up when I was younger. My parents were quite abusive to each other. So I wasn't physically being abused, but I was subjected to a lot of that. And I think probably more could have been done about that by teachers or anyone that – counsellors and things, like they could've called child protection and get someone to check up. Yeah. I think I would explain to them what was happening and that I didn't feel safe … I don't know how much I disclosed to her, but I think from what I said, she definitely could've called child protection and had a check-up wellbeing something. Yeah. (Daisey)

In her reflections, Daisey elaborated further on what she perceived to be a failure to intervene and address the abuse by connecting it to her current sense of wellbeing as a young adult. She explained:

> *I feel like I've carried that hurt with me, and I'm only just dealing with it in counselling now and still scared to unpack it all because it was a lot. I think having that support to unpack it all earlier and start dealing with it would've changed who I am now, I think, as a person. So I think being a bit more heard and having that support to work through it would've been helpful. (Daisey)*

Children and young people's stories and reflections on mandatory reporting very clearly indicate that they recognise and accept the necessity for information sharing without consent. Additionally, children and young people have directly expressed a preference for transparency, communication and consideration of the time needed to prepare for their physical, mental and emotional safety when mandatory reporting processes are imminent. Beyond these needs, children and young people also reinforced the importance of mandatory reporting and the critical role these processes play in the Victorian system's management of their risk and in opportunities for future healing and recovery.

In considering the implication of these findings for the development of the Child and Young Person-focused MARAM practice guidance and tools, and in particular any guidance around mandatory reporting, we suggest that the *Family Violence Information Sharing Guidelines*, Chapter 5 in particular, be taken into consideration (Victorian Government, 2021). Under the FVISS, consent is not required to share relevant information to assess or manage family violence to a child or young person or to promote their wellbeing or safety – but professionals should seek and take into account the view of children and family members about information sharing if it is appropriate, safe and reasonable to do so. It is therefore expected that Information Sharing Entities should seek to preserve and promote positive relationships between the child and their significant adults/family members when sharing information (Victorian Government, 2021, 70). These Guidelines focus on promoting, where safe to do so, an open and transparent relationship between service providers, a child victim-survivor and a parent who is not a perpetrator (and may also be a victim-survivor).

Children and young people's experiences of mandatory reporting highlight the need for greater consistency in the operation of mandatory reporting requirements across a range of settings.

Conclusion

> *It's important to identify children as victims in their own right, of family violence. Because in the system where children are often seen – or often un-seen, rather – it's important to, I think, even just give that child the validation that someone is recognising you as a victim. Someone's recognising that the things you've gone through are real, and they are impactful. (Max)*

This research has sought to give voice to the experiences and expertise of children and young people who have experienced family violence and have navigated a range of different services and supports across the whole of Victoria's family violence response system. While there were significant differences across the reflections shared by interview participants, there were also some stark commonalities, which have been explored throughout this report. Children and young people in this study were unanimous in agreement that current responses to young victim-survivors of family violence are not adequate and that there are significant opportunities to improve current practices.

This study highlights the importance of:

- system enhancements in terms of system navigation and accessibility,
- ensuring the availability of child-centric spaces,
- age-appropriate supports and individualised responses,
- safe and trauma informed practices, and
- greater consistency in the operation of mandatory reporting requirements.

Each of these recommended system enhancements is essential to ensuring safety, empowerment and better outcomes for children and young people experiencing family violence.

Implications for policy and practice

The experiences of the children and young people who participated in this study are critical to understanding how practitioners should engage young victim-survivors in safe and validating conversations about the abuse they have experienced. The reflections provided by children and young people highlight their preference for having communication with them tailored to account for individual age-specific needs – along with discrete sensitivities, such as emotional or trauma-based requirements, language barriers and accessibility needs. Young people warned of the potential for alienation resulting from the use of specialist language or labels and binary perpetrator and victim-survivor categorisations.

Children and young people interviewed also spoke of the need for responses to include an educative function that can disrupt cycles of violence and the normalisation of abuse. Young people spoke to the importance of not feeling patronised in the process of receiving advice and support. They discussed their critical need to receive validation and the need of authentic first points of contact that provide validation of the harms experienced. Having a sense of agency and self-respect emerged from young people's comments as a crucial component of the path to support and recovery.

Ensuring that children and young people are empowered through the process of reform

As part of the 'check out' process at the end of each interview, we would check with the young person about how they were feeling and what they were planning to do after the interview. Responses to these questions varied across participants, but it provided the opportunity for one of them to express a sense of empowerment for having participated in this research. When prompted, the young person commented:

I feel good, actually. I feel quite empowered, yeah. (Daisey)

For our research team, ensuring that children and young people were empowered and in control of the interview they participated in was crucial. In providing this report to policy makers, we now pass on that challenge. Responses to children and young people experiencing family violence must centre their agency, empowerment and control over their lives. This recognition of strength and agency must be front and centre in the development of policy and practice responses seeking to address children and young people's family violence safety, support and recovery needs.

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Thematic Interview Schedule

CHECK-IN

Instructions/information on check in:
You can choose one - two check-in questions and invite everyone in the room to answer – not just the young people. It can be helpful for the facilitator to model and go first. Asking young people to start with a check-in question. This can be useful to support people in feeling more comfortable in sharing and breaking the ice. It also be used to check in with how people are feeling to be aware of where people are at and what supports are needed.

- What have you been listening to, watching, or reading lately?
- What is an interesting or boring fact about you?
- Is there anything you need in this meeting today to feel present? E.g. Breaks, to share something, camera off.
- On a scale of 1-10 how are you feeling today and why?

Each interview will be guided by the following thematic areas and questions:

Interview theme: Wellbeing – mental health and physical health

1. What does wellbeing mean to you? (Wellbeing covers things like: 'mental health' and/or 'physical health', 'feeling comfortable', 'having your needs met', 'feeling happy', 'feeling good' and 'feeling safe')

2. What is the best way to ask about how your mental health or your physical health and wellbeing is going?
   For example, if your teacher or worker wants to ask how you are or what is going on for you, how would you like to be asked about this?

Interview theme: Working with you
(Note for interviewer head of beginning this section – let participants know during the interview that we are not talking about friends and family here we are asking about professional people)

1. What worked well when people were trying to give you the help and support you needed? (Alternative: What was helpful when people were trying to support you?)

2. What didn't work for you when you were trying to get help and support? (Alternative: What wasn't good when you were trying to get help?)

3. What is a good way to ask you about whether you have been hurt or if you are scared?
   For example, has there been a time you were trying to tell people you were experiencing family violence or that you were hurt, and you didn't feel heard?

4. What has made you feel listened to when looking for support? Have there been times when you haven't felt heard? If so, what would have helped in those situations?

5. How would you like people to respond when you tell them about family violence?

6. Have you told people about your experiences, and they didn't respond the way you wanted? What did they do to make you feel this way?

7. Have you told people about your experience, and they responded in a way that you **did** want? What did they do to make you feel this way?

8. Do you think support should look different for children and young people depending on their age? (Or 'What support would have helped when you were younger, compared to now?')

9. How? What are some of things that would have helped you when you were younger?

Interview theme: Resilience and resistance

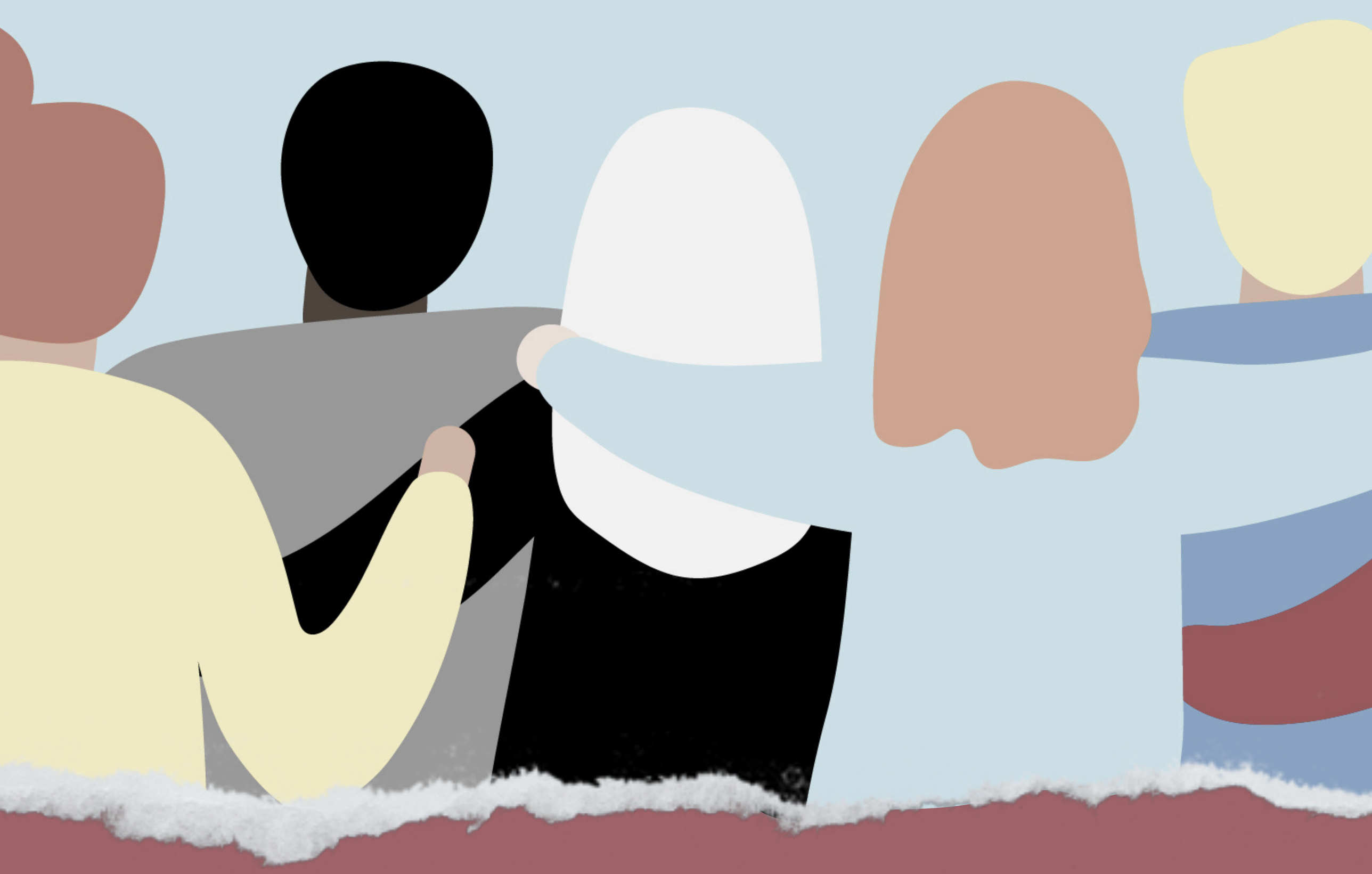
1. What things do you do/have you done to keep yourself or your family/another family member safe? Keeping safe can look different to different people – it can be physical, mental, emotional, or social.

2. What things do you do to feel better when you are stressed, worried or scared?

3. How would you like to be helped and supported?
   For example, if you asked your teacher for help, what would you want them to do?

CHECK-OUT

- What is one thing you're going to do to take care of yourself?
  (Note for interviewer – this need to be different for younger children/young people e.g. what can we/parent/carer/service do to help you to take care of yourself today?)
- What are you doing after speaking with me/us?
- Going back to our scale in the check-in, how are you feeling from 1-10?



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