Relationships Australia has been honoured to have his Excellency the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC (Retd) Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia as our national patron for the past five years (from 2014).
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The need for agile and proactive programs to support Australian families and communities is as obvious today as it has ever been in the long history of Relationships Australia. In a time when, as a society, we are increasingly busy and enjoy fewer meaningful social connections, a variety of competing pressures have contributed to deepening vulnerabilities across the community and, in particular, in various at-risk cohorts. As a result, added pressure on relationships in various settings – family, community, workplace – has seen a strong increase in demand for services.

In response to this demand, Relationships Australia takes great pride in offering a range of evidence based relationship services that support all Australians, at all ages, and across the life cycle of the relationship.

This year, our Relationships Australia federation welcomed a new injection of funding for our Family Relationship Services. Our Family Relationship Centres are now funded by the Australian Government Attorney-General’s Department to support separating families to resolve disagreements over property as well as parenting. Relationships Australia was also successful in tendering to continue to deliver the Family Relationships Advice Line for the next five years, and in securing new funding from the Australian Government Attorney-General’s Department for pilot programs to respond to elder abuse.

We also welcomed the announcement of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety and the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, together with the Productivity Commission’s inquiry into the Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health.

These provide critical opportunities for the service provision sector to influence service delivery to some of the most vulnerable populations in Australia.

Within our National Office, there has been significant change this year, as we bid farewell to our longserving National Executive Officer, Alison Brook, who has moved to Relationships Australia Canberra and Region, and welcomed Nick Tebbey to the role in February 2019. The National Office has been active this year across many areas of policy, advocating for enhanced service delivery and stronger outcomes in areas where Australians most need them. More details of these activities can be found on the following pages.

The theme of this year’s annual report is ‘Strengthening families: translating evidence into practice’ – a mission that embodies the work of Relationships Australia. Across the eight states and territories, our members have demonstrated their commitment to exploring new service offerings, enhancing existing programs and collecting the data necessary to evaluate outcomes and measure impact.

Throughout the report, we are proud to provide examples of this commitment as we share some of the highlights of the past 12 months.

Ian Law
Board chair

Relationships Australia takes great pride in offering a range of evidence based relationship services that support all Australians, at all ages, and across the life cycle of the relationship.
On 19 March 2019, the Attorney-General launched the National Plan to Respond to the Abuse of Older Australians (Elder Abuse) 2019–2023. It sets out a framework for ongoing cooperation, action and monitoring against key priority areas and, importantly, brings with it funding for three new service delivery models to combat elder abuse. One of these models, ‘case management and mediation services’ is being exclusively trialled by Relationships Australia, in four states and territories.

We welcome the investment of government funding, following years of advocacy for services to work with families with an ageing relative, to help them reduce conflict and build their capacity to deal with ageing-related issues such as grief and loss, end-of-life care, retirement and inheritance, family violence and elder abuse.

Australian Law Reform Commission: Review of the Family Law System


In April 2019 the ALRC report was made public. While we believe there is still significant ground to cover before we can achieve a family law system that adequately meets the needs of its users and avoids long-term damage, especially to children, we welcome many of the report’s findings and recommendations and look forward to working with the Australian Government on their implementation.

A national discussion about loneliness

In September 2018, we celebrated Relationships Australia’s 70th anniversary, hosting an event for friends and stakeholders at the National Gallery of Australia. As well as providing an opportunity to reflect on our evolution over the past seven decades, this occasion enabled us to shed some light on the growing problem of loneliness in our community. The event featured a panel of eminent researchers and practitioners discussing interventions to tackle loneliness, as well as the launch of our research into Australia’s loneliness epidemic by the Assistant Minister for Families and Social Services, the Hon Michelle Landry MP.

Along with others, Relationships Australia has been a key participant in a national discussion over the past year about the health and social risks posed by loneliness, and into the future we plan to develop practical programs that can address this issue in the community.

Key stakeholder engagements

Over the past year, we participated in a range of consultations in the Attorney-General’s and social services departments and with stakeholders in our traditional areas of work. These have included consultations on program redesign and outcome measurement, as well as increasing access to services for vulnerable groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, and those affected by drought as well as culturally and linguistically diverse clients.
Submissions

This year we made a range of submissions to the Australian Government and other inquiries, including:

- Australian Law Reform Commission Review of the Family Law System
- Proposed merger of the Family Court of Australia and the Federal Circuit Court
- Productivity Commission inquiry into the Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health
- ACT Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing – development of priority areas
- ACT Government – review of domestic adoption processes
- Submission to the Productivity Commission on public health approaches to protecting children
- 2019–20 Federal Budget
- Department of Social Services, Stronger Outcomes for Families Discussion Paper and Background Paper.

Monthly survey

Our monthly survey continued to remain popular, generating interest from a wide range of people, media and academia. Key topics included loneliness, finances in a relationship, pets and elder abuse as well as surveys gauging community perceptions on topics ranging from marriage to volunteering, and from infidelity through to alcohol and drinking.

Where you can find more information

For more information on the work we do, visit Relationships Australia at relationships.org.au or call us on (02) 6162 9300.
Neighbour Day 2019 was enthusiastically embraced by communities from all corners of Australia, who participated in a variety of neighbourly events, from garage sales and street libraries to barbecues, morning and afternoon teas, street parties and even street art installations.
The theme for Neighbour Day this year was ‘Loneliness – what neighbours can do to create connections’ and Australia has done a fantastic job of doing just that.

Our Very Neighbourly Organisations and our amazing ambassadors – including Natalie Ahmat, Nick Duigan, Costa Georgiadis, Julie Goodwin, Hugh Mackay, Sophie Thomson and Neighbour Day founder Andrew Heslop – all combined to make Neighbour Day a success.

Neighbour Day 2019 engaged an even broader range of supporters including federal and state MPs, councils and mayors, government departments, state emergency services, Neighbourhood Watch groups, non-government organisations, businesses – and neighbourly pets!

One of Neighbour Day’s Very Neighbourly Organisations, R U OK? caught up with their ambassador and Ramsay Street favourite, Rob Mills, for Neighbour Day this year. Rob suggests that being neighbourly might seem daunting for some of us, but a small gesture can go a long way.

Another Neighbours’ actor and Dementia Australia Ambassador Takaya Honda produced a video to promote the Dementia Friends program and utilised Neighbour Day to shine a light on the loneliness suffered by people living with dementia, who often become socially isolated as a result of their illness.

Two new, high-profile Very Neighbourly Organisations, Victoria SES and CFA, collaborated with Red Cross Victoria to host a Neighbour Day Challenge with their staff, members, volunteers and communities of interest. The campaign was in recognition that Victorians who have strong relationships with their neighbours are more likely to help one another and have better outcomes when faced with emergencies.

For the second year running, the Department of Health in Tasmania teamed up with Relationships Australia Tasmania for its annual Healthy Tasmania Community Challenge. The challenge encouraged people to reach out to those around them to create well-connected communities, by either hosting or attending a registered Neighbour Day event on 31 March with a $5000 prize for the winning community.

Neighbourly Network member, Neighbourhood Watch ACT, joined with our partners at the ACT Government, Justice and Community Safety to launch their Neighbour Day promotion in the ACT via video on social media.

Very Neighbourly Organisation, City of Kwinana in Western Australia, launched its Neighbour Day Every Day program, a place-based initiative that operates year round under the Neighbour Day banner. Promotions included a massive electronic billboard on the freeway championing Neighbour Day Every Day and how to get involved.

For the fourth year running, a number of Lendlease Communities in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria supported their residents to get involved in Neighbour Day through promotion and supermarket voucher incentives, with more than 1000 people joining in.

A small qualitative study of 2018 Neighbour Day hosts, ‘Evaluating the impact of Neighbour Day on the community,’ was conducted around Australia in partnership with Swinburne University of Technology. This research told us that Neighbour Day helps create ongoing and enduring connections between people and their communities. These enduring connections are what help people emerge from loneliness, contribute to building a sense of belonging and give people a sense of purpose and identity.

With continued interaction, relationships formed through Neighbour Day often lead to increased neighbourhood trust that in turn leads to neighbours experiencing a greater sense of safety in their neighbourhood, and offering support to each other.

Relationships Australia partnered with Australian National University to help evaluate participation in Neighbour Day events in 2019. We surveyed over 400 hosts of Neighbour Day events, with 200 people completing both pre-event and post-event surveys. Findings indicated that there was a significant increase in participants’ sense of neighbourhood identification and belonging from before to after the Neighbour Day 2019 event or action taken. There was also a significant increase in participants’ perception of the environmental quality in their neighbourhood from the before to after Neighbour Day 2019 event or action. The full report will be released later in 2019.
Over 40 separate research projects were underway across the Relationships Australia Research Network in 2018–19, with the majority of the projects conducted in partnership with universities and other research bodies.

These partners include Griffith University, University of Queensland, University of Sunshine Coast, Central Queensland University, Deakin University, University of New South Wales, Southern Cross University, La Trobe University, University of Technology Sydney, University of Melbourne, Victoria University, Monash University, University of Tasmania, Menzies Institute for Medical Research and ACON.

The research network supports research and evaluation projects carried out within the Relationships Australia federation and undertakes independent research on behalf of the federation.

Current projects are primarily designed to assess the processes and outcomes of a diverse spectrum of Relationships Australia services, including family violence prevention, loneliness, gambling, childhood trauma, family dispute resolution, family counselling, parent education, couples counselling, same-sex parents, fathering, Aboriginal services and social media.

Many of these projects have already resulted in publications in peer reviewed journals and numerous sector conference presentations (see reference section below). The findings are also influencing the design of models of practice within Relationship Australia organisations and more broadly in the Australian and international family service systems. These significant research efforts are supported and driven by Relationships Australia organisations as they strive to learn and improve services and outcomes for clients.

The Relationships Australia Family Dispute Resolution Outcomes Research Project

In 2019, the National Research Network continued to implement this large three-year project funded by the Relationships Australia federation. The study was designed to generate evidence on the outcomes of the federation’s Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) services, in both parenting and property disputes.

The study employed a longitudinal survey design with quantitative data collected through client surveys at multiple points in time, as well as interviews with a sub-sample of participants to further investigate experiences and perceptions of the dispute resolution process.
The evidence clearly and unequivocally demonstrates the effectiveness of FDR to resolve complex family separation parenting and property matters.

The research is now complete, with 1700 clients completing surveys in 2017–18 and 200 interviews conducted in late 2018 and early 2019.

Papers based on preliminary findings from the study were presented at the National Conciliation Conference in April 2019, with more papers to be presented at the Family and Relationships Services Australia conference in November 2019. Further papers will be developed for publication in peer-reviewed journals.

The results of this substantial body of work will be used to improve service delivery models to better meet the needs of our clients. The evidence clearly and unequivocally demonstrates the effectiveness of FDR to resolve complex family separation parenting and property matters. Both quantitative and qualitative data also indicate benefits to participation in FDR regardless of agreement outcome, in terms of psychosocial adjustment but also in terms of facilitating and improving communication between separating parties. Reaching agreement brings further benefit in terms of reducing acrimony and psychological distress, and improving adjustment to separation.

National Client Outcomes Measurement Project

The Research Network initiated a new large Australia-wide research project in 2019. The Family and Relationships Services Outcomes project is designed to deliver a robust and rigorously tested client outcomes framework to measure client benefit in counselling as practised across RASTs.

The project will consult with Family and Relationships Services programs nationally in order to build on existing learnings and practice across the network. A client and practitioner co-design approach will inform the design of a shared program logic, and the development and testing of a methodology for routine measurement of client outcomes. A comparison to Department of Social Services Standard Client Outcomes Reporting (SCORE) is a key component of the study, which will empower the federation to have one voice when presenting an evidence-based methodology that will complement and enhance the SCORE outcomes framework. The methodology will be both informed and tested by clients and practitioners, and inclusive of vulnerable and disadvantaged client groups.
190,166 Clients

56% Female
43% Male

17,627 Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
10,594 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

106 Venues Around Australia

2,104 Staff
Aboriginal Parenting Orders Program

The Parenting Orders Program aims to assist separated parents reduce conflict and improve levels of agreement, communication and cooperation regarding their children’s needs and contact arrangements.

In 2018, Relationships Australia Tasmania identified that a six-week series of education workshops or coaching sessions did not adequately cater for or address issues that can surface when a family breakdown occurs within the Aboriginal community. Partnering with the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, Relationships Australia Tasmania worked to culturally adapt, promote and pilot the program.

Aboriginal Program Worker, Jaye Clair, noted that often for the Aboriginal community, the group format can be off-putting for fear of judgement. It was, therefore, essential to work with the Aboriginal community in shaping the program on where and how they would like it delivered.

The community’s concerns around trust, particularly towards unfamiliar people and organisations, were addressed through facilitating workshops at local community centres and in partnership with familiar and trusted organisations rather than at Relationships Australia Tasmania facilities.

Another significant difference was that it was not a court-ordered service. Traditionally, a high number of participants in the Parenting Orders Program are referred from the court, but participants were able to voluntarily enter the Aboriginal program.

The program has since gained momentum and is now delivered to several Aboriginal communities throughout the state.

Participants cover topics such as effective communication, parenting and conflict resolution, with the core focus of group workshops to help separated parents understand the effect of their conflict on their children and how to communicate more effectively.

Sharing and learning within a group setting aims to engage participants in group conversations, reduce feelings of isolation and develop further connections in the community. Cultivating networks and relationships within the community is an integral part of the program.

Before the commencement of each program, Jaye works to build rapport by establishing a key contact in the community: 'It’s about making connections – when people know each other, and trust each other, they work well together,' she said.
The program is advertised to key members of the community, using word of mouth to generate interest. The program is promoted and run with other activities and programs held at the community centres, encouraging people to drop in and meet Jaye before joining the group.

The program is demonstrating value, with high demand for the program creating follow-on on sessions and communities requesting the program at their local centres. Jaye said she frequently hears from the centres asking when she will be running the next program.

Programs that understand the cultural and social fabric of the communities they serve ultimately lead to more meaningful support; however, simply understanding is not enough. The Aboriginal Connections Parenting Orders Program demonstrates the importance of genuine consultation and reflective practice that provides culturally relevant services, as defined by those who receive them.

**Strengthening families with an evidence-informed framework**

Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) has provided ‘early matters’, a five-year pilot program funded by the Department of Social Services, to promote and strengthen healthy relationships in areas of Sunshine and Ballarat, Victoria, since 2015.

The foundation of RAV’s work is the importance of interpersonal and family relationships as strong determinants of health and wellbeing. The ‘early matters’ program addresses the increasingly recognised need for prevention and early intervention services, and engaging with at-risk families, particularly during the early years of child development, which can have lifelong consequences for health and wellbeing.

‘Early matters’ aims to address risk and protective factors within families and relationships during critical life transition points, such as having a baby or children starting kindergarten and school. Families also have the opportunity to seek support early without feeling stigmatised.

We know that how services are delivered is as important as which services are provided; ‘early matters’ uses a combination of early intervention and preventive group education programs that are delivered through universal services. Each program draws on the best available evidence about risk and protective factors, and program delivery and implementation methods.
RAV’s group programs include ATTUNE antenatal and ATTUNEpplus postnatal programs in hospitals and child and maternal health centres. Ready Set Kids and ‘I like, like you UP’ are delivered in playgroups, kindergartens and primary schools. Delivering groups in these settings enables RAV to work with vulnerable children, parents and families who may not otherwise receive support.

‘early matters’ also includes Tuning in to KidsTM, an evidence-based parenting program focused on emotional intelligence, and a strengths-based home visiting service. Approximately two-thirds of Tuning in to Kids participants transition to RAV’s home visiting service, helping to integrate program learnings at home.

Recognising that a child’s exposure to family violence is a strong risk factor of adverse lifelong outcomes and the necessity of working with children to promote respect and gender equality, all ‘early matters’ programs incorporate frameworks for family violence prevention, gender equity and mental health promotion.

Evaluations of ‘early matters’ include a combination of validated and fit-for-purpose tools to measure outcomes and demonstrate program efficacy. For example, the home visiting service uses a validated pre and post measure of perceived parenting skills and abilities, which is a reliable predictor of child mental health, emotional and behavioural issues. The ‘I like, like you UP’ program has been recognised and listed as a promising program with the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Evaluation data demonstrates that ‘early matters’ practitioners are successful in engaging and forming partnerships with parents to identify issues, goals and strategies, which is known to lead to better outcomes for children and families. Notably, while engaging men and fathers is often a significant challenge for child and family services, the RAV program is able to do so successfully, with fathers representing 46% of participants in ATTUNE.

Holding Children Together in Alice Springs

Holding Children Together is an Alice Springs program run by Relationships Australia Northern Territory that supports children aged five to 12 who have experienced complex trauma. It aims to help children to build emotional stability and establish a stronger sense of safety and resilience.

A team of three counsellors mainly work in schools but also see children at the office or in the children’s residential care homes. Holding Children Together counsellors apply evidence-based trauma principles to help improve the overall functioning and wellbeing of the children. With a large Aboriginal community in Alice Springs, Holding Children Together also aims to help the children grow stronger connections to family and culture (where appropriate) with the support of two Aboriginal cultural advisers.

Children’s counsellor, Daniel, recently worked with a family for eight sessions plus three follow-up calls after the face-to-face meetings. The mother was concerned that her son, aged 10, was having significant difficulty separating at the school drop-off, often to the extent that she would be forced to take time off work. Daniel began sessions using a family therapeutic approach, ensuring the sessions were child inclusive and child-focused. After a discussion with the boy’s parents, Daniel developed a hypothesis as to why the family system might be contributing to the boy’s anxiety. There had been significant but slow changes in the household over the preceding year. The child was the youngest of five and seemed to take on responsibilities and activities beyond his age.

One of Daniel’s goals was to help build a stronger bond between mother and son, focusing on their attachment. He provided psychoeducation in attachment theories to help them better understand their experiences. Daniel suggested to the mother how and when to engage in child-led play, including opportunities to practise. The parents also reflected on their parenting approaches and explored the impact of family dynamics upon the child. They were able to recognise the changes that needed to happen. The boy was able to express through a simple scaling exercise that his level of anxiety had gone down as the sessions progressed. After four months, both mother and son created an artwork to reflect their journey but also the effort they had jointly put in to create the change they both wanted.

When contra-indications arose, Daniel changed his approach. In an early session with the child, a narrative therapy technique produced a disharmonious power struggle in the relationship, so this approached was changed to play therapy. Family therapy was used to access the family dynamics that played a part and formed part of his interventions.

Daniel’s successful work with this family is an example of the evidence-based approach the Holding Children Together program uses with families.
Assisting vulnerable children and young people

The Riverina Murray Family Referral Service (FRS)’s FRS in Schools Program extends the NSW Department of Health’s FRS program to assist vulnerable children and young people within a regional NSW school environment. The service is funded by participating schools and is a distinct service from the FRS.

What began as a pilot in 2014 has continued to be rolled out to other schools in the Riverina because of the positive outcomes achieved. Currently there are nine participating schools with three FRS workers shared across these schools. To date, over 1500 students and their families have been assisted.

The service aims to address the increasing welfare needs of children, young people and their families. Students who are at risk of harm, underachievement and developmental delays can be identified and supported, and appropriate interventions provided by a service that is independent of the education system. The following case illustrates the impact of the program.

Kylie*, a 15-year-old year 10 student, was referred to the service by her school after she left home because of regular physical abuse from her mother, who had significant alcohol and drug issues. Kylie had multiple and complex needs compounded by her own daily cannabis use and her antisocial and aggressive outbursts at school.

Initially the Relationships Australia Canberra and Region worker contacted Kylie’s aunt, who she lived with upon leaving home, and began to assess how best to engage, support and link Kylie and her aunt with services. They were linked to Centrelink for financial assistance, Pathways for Kylie’s drug use, Anglicare Homeless Youth Assistance Program to support Kylie’s living arrangements and for holistic case management, as well as school supports to enhance Kylie’s safety, education and continuity at school. This also enabled school staff to be aware of Kylie’s situation.

Six months on and Kylie is actively engaged with the services and has improved her school attendance from below 10% to 86%. Kylie’s school and Anglicare have a financial agreement to supply her with food daily at school and regular financial assistance is in place to purchase groceries at home. Kylie has a laptop for school and her school fees and uniforms have been covered. Pathways will be closing Kylie’s case soon due to her positive response to the drug rehabilitation program and Kylie is being supported to transition to independent living later in 2019.

In addition to assisting vulnerable students like Kylie, FRS in Schools Program workers spend a quarter of their time supporting teachers and principals to explore alternative strategies to address vulnerable students’ needs and to improve their knowledge of local service options. Engaging school staff is key to ensuring sustainable positive outcomes are achieved for at-risk children and young people.

The 10 other FRS in NSW have since implemented, or are developing, the FRS in Schools Program in their communities.

*Name has been changed.
Supporting families and improving client outcomes

All families go through life’s ups and downs and many parents have concerns about their children’s mental, emotional and social wellbeing. Often families need support to get through the tough times.

The key focus of 4families, a Family Mental Health Support Service funded by the Department of Social Services, is the mental health and wellbeing of children. Children and young people are put front and centre and their voice is heard throughout the process.

4families supports families and carers, linking them to a variety of services to reduce family stress and enable children and young people to reach their full potential. The focus is on prevention and early intervention by addressing issues that affect the mental and emotional wellbeing of children and young people.

Relationships Australia Western Australia introduced the use of session rating scale (SRS) and outcomes rating scale (ORS) instruments five years ago to measure the strength of the therapeutic relationship within 4families. This has provided a process to improve client relationships, client outcomes and strengthen family relationships within the program.

The SRS was developed by Scott Millar to evaluate the connection and outcomes between the counsellor and client and uses a four item visual scale, assessing key dimensions of effective therapeutic relationships. In 4families, the SRS is administered, scored and discussed at the end of each session to get real-time feedback from children and their parents/carers so that any problems can be quickly identified and addressed. The SRS measures respect and understanding, relevance of the goals and topics, client–practitioner fit and overall alliance.

The SRS allows 4families practitioners to adapt their approach as a response to feedback, ensuring a fluid and ever-adapting response to the client’s needs.

4families practitioners use ORS, a session-by-session measure designed to assess areas of life functioning known to change as a result of therapeutic intervention. These include symptom distress, interpersonal wellbeing, social role and overall wellbeing.

Using these systems to monitor the progress of outcomes through client feedback has helped to facilitate strong client engagement and continuing positive results within the 4families program.

Since its implementation with 4families, results from using ORS and SRS instruments have been positive and have provided these useful insights:

- Over 6000 clients have been assessed and their cases closed. Of these, 92.5% reported some improvement and only 7.5% reported slipping further away from achieving their goals.

- 1238 clients (20.6%) reported ‘clinically significant change’ (i.e. their scores on the ORS indicate they have moved from the ‘clinical’ range to the ‘non-clinical’ range and their improvement has been statistically significant).

- A further 2275 clients (38%) reported a shift from the ‘clinical’ to the ‘non-clinical’ range, but to a lesser degree.

- In addition, 350 clients (5.8%) clients improved significantly, though their scores were not in the ‘clinical’ range to begin with.

- 1640 clients (27%) whose scores indicate they were ‘non-clinical’ to begin with also improved, but to a lesser extent.
Gambling harm: Evidence of Recovery

The analysis of eight years of client data from the Gambling Help Services (GHS) delivered by Relationships Australia South Australia (RASA) has demonstrated the effectiveness of the program.

GHS responds to gambling-related harm through a public health harm-minimisation and recovery approach. The GHS offers a continuum of responses, including prevention programs, community education, and evidenced based and holistic treatment tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of clients, case management and relapse prevention.

Over the past 8 years, prevalence studies confirm that there is an explosion of online gambling enabled by the continuous internet connectivity. Nonetheless, harm resulting from pokies continues to be the primary source of problems faced by GHS clients. Clients may be experiencing harm from their own or another's gambling and the negative effects range in severity.

The analysis of client data collected for the last eight years showed that RASA is contributing to a significant improvement in the wellbeing and social functioning of those experiencing gambling-related harm.

Results of this analysis indicate that, between the first and at least 6th session, the GHS reduced psychological distress from high to moderate; reduced problem gambling behaviours by two thirds; reduced typical fortnightly gambling spend from $350 to $0, and; reduced functional impairment (the inability to participate in social, psychological and economic elements of daily life) by 75%. Moreover, an outstanding 80% of clients and practitioners reported that therapeutic goals were achieved.

RASA GHS results demonstrate that recovery from the full range of gambling related harms is possible. Going forward, we aim to continue to further improve the wellbeing of individuals, families and communities through preventative initiatives aimed at assisting young people and their parents manage online gaming and gambling behaviours.
Demonstrating success of the Family Dispute Resolution program

A recent national study showed that the FDR program of Relationships Australia Queensland (RAQ) significantly benefits separating families, with 65% of participants reaching partial or full agreement on at least one matter within 12 months of intake. The study also found that parenting participants who engaged with the mediation process showed improved adjustment to separation and parenting stress over time.

When asked about aspects of the program they were most satisfied with, Queensland participants overwhelmingly cited the mediators. A typical comment was: ‘The mediator every time has just been amazing … just [with] the ability to just calm a situation I think and get people to talk about what they need to be talking about.’ Overall, the mediators were said to be impartial, good listeners, and set a clear agenda to guide the participants through the process, which many said helped them progress towards an agreement.

Clients in situations of high conflict with their ex-partners felt safe to voice their concerns with the mediator’s support: ‘I could actually speak so I could say what I wanted for my son … I felt completely safe with the mediator,’ said a participant. This environment was often achieved by the mediator helping participants to focus on the child’s needs, which helped them to work together to resolve issues. ‘Going to that mediation gave us the opportunity, both of us, just to talk and say what many months of emails back and forth had not resolved,’ a participant said.

Participants said accessibility and affordability were two of the most important contributors to their overall program satisfaction. Clients in rural areas found the Telephone Dispute Resolution Service helpful and a reason to choose RAQ when in need of support.

Avoiding high legal costs was also cited as a significant benefit for participants with conflictual or acrimonious relationships with their co-parent: ‘Well I haven’t had to pay [for FDR]. It just saves me a lot of money [compared to] going through a solicitor and I am very thankful for it.’

For RAQ, the FDR Outcomes Study has provided valuable insight into how mediation services are helping clients work towards better outcomes for their families.

“’The mediator every time has just been amazing … just [with] the ability to just calm a situation I think and get people to talk about what they need to be talking about.’
Increasing children’s participation when parents separate

Government strategy at the national and New South Wales level – the latter with the significant ‘Their Futures Matter’ initiative – has brought into sharp focus the importance and impact of the participation of children in decisions affecting them.

Australian Institute of Family Studies research and years of practice experience with child inclusive practice demonstrates the power of including children’s voices in the FDR process to assist parents focus on the specific and individualised needs of each child when parents have separated/divorced.

The recommendations of the Australian Law Reform Commission’s review of the family law system (March 2019) highlighted that Family Relationship Centres, which were established to assist families post-separation, had inadvertently reinforced the absence of children from services by not targeting funding for child inclusive practice. This has also led to workforce challenges, with insufficient trained and skilled child consultants in the family relationship sector, and therefore impacting the ability to ensure meaningful child inclusion in FDR practice.

Relationships Australia New South Wales (RANSW) is committed to increasing the participation of children and young people in its family law programs. Its strategy is to work holistically with separated families and consult children and young people unless there are valid reasons not to. RANSW has assisted 7210 clients in its dispute resolution program alone over the past year, so this strategy requires a significant investment of resources. Working with children in this way is critical to good outcomes for children’s mental health and wellbeing and improving their relationships within the family. This strategy is best enabled by a multidisciplinary team approach that combines RANSW services in FDR and family counselling, and relationship education.


Given the prevalence of family violence and child protection issues, the expertise of specialist child consultants within this model is pivotal to providing participation for children while maintaining safety (protection) and a focus on the children’s best interests.

To meet the challenge of creating a significant workforce of specially trained child consultants, RANSW has invested in workforce capacity building. It has combined the post-separation expertise of family law specialists with the family systems and relationship wisdom of experienced family counsellors, resulting in a common language and systemic framework across the organisation.

A comprehensive evaluation and outcomes research project is underway, with parents reporting that as children and young people are given more say in decisions affecting them, they feel better ‘attuned’ to and able to reflect on each child’s unique needs, and able to plan more cooperatively around their parenting arrangements.

“Working with children in this way is critical to good outcomes for children’s mental health and wellbeing and improving their relationships within the family.”
International seminar and conference presentations


Stott, J. (2019, June) Removing barriers and building bridges to address adolescent violence in the family. Presentation at the New York University, International Association of Social Work in Group Therapy annual symposium, New York, USA.

Stott, J. (2019, June) Sound Partnership House and Step Up for SA. Presentation at the International Association of Social Group Work Symposium, New York, USA.

National seminar and conference presentations


Betti, K. (April, 2019) Family mediation coaching: Assisting clients to shift from being defensive to responsive. Presentation at the National Mediation Conference, Canberra, ACT.


Herbig, J. (2019, June). Bricks and Mortar: A solid foundation, then corrosion turns ‘nuts and bolts’ to rust. Presentation at the Child Inclusive Practice Forum, Darwin, NT.


Lezanski, J. (2019, April). Capacity to participate vs capacity to decide. Panelist at the National Mediation Conference, Canberra, ACT.


Lloyd, K., & Kelly, M. (2019, June). Capturing the child’s voice in our Client Outcomes Pilot project. Presentation at the Child Inclusive Practice Forum, Darwin, NT.


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