

Uniting

Evaluation summary.

Keeping families together.

A summary of Uniting's participatory evaluation of its Family Preservation and Reunification (FPR) Program.



About the program

The FPR program aims to help prevent child removals and safely reunify children with their families. It forms part of the Victorian Government's 'Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children' initiative.

Uniting delivers the FPR Program from 10 sites across Victoria. The program provides intensive, in-home support to families at risk, i.e. families experiencing complex challenges such as family violence, homelessness, substance misuse, trauma and mental health issues. The program aims to help prevent child removals and safely reunify children with their families.

About the evaluation

We conducted this evaluation to better understand the outcomes experienced by families who engaged in our FPR Program, and to identify the barriers to, and enablers of, success.

Over an 18-month period we asked families to complete a Community Services Outcomes Tree (CSOT) survey when they exited the service. This data was used to conduct the evaluation.

The evaluation used a participatory research approach which centres lived experience and collaboration between consumers, practitioners and program leaders. Consumers with lived experience of family services partnered with practitioners and leaders to interpret the data, ensuring findings were grounded in real family experiences.

Together, the team evaluated 124 surveys and over 1,000 written responses.

"I honestly believe that lived experience is non-negotiable for good evaluation and improving services.

"Data gives us numbers, but lived experience gives us the story behind those numbers ... Without it, we're missing a piece of the puzzle."

– Lahrissa Sanderson, Uniting Consumer Partner

Evaluation team:

4 consumer partners
2 program staff
2 evaluation staff

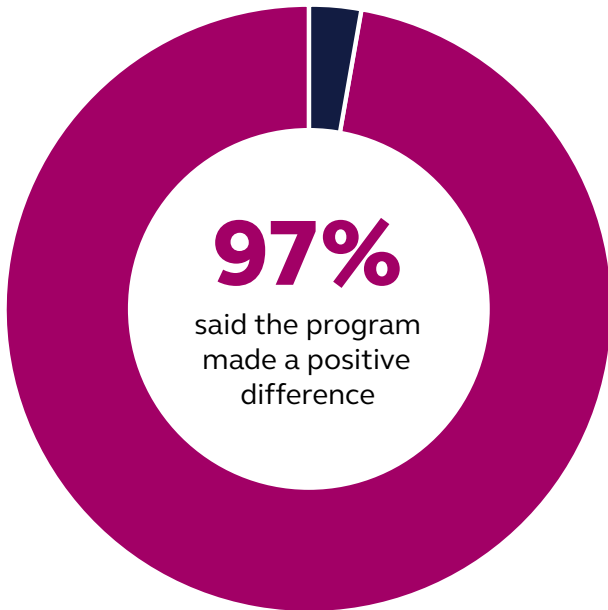
124 consumer surveys analysed

1000+ written survey responses analysed

The difference the program makes

Many families said the program helped them keep their children at home, or bring them back home, and felt this likely wouldn't have happened without Uniting's support.

Almost all survey participants (97%) said the program made a positive difference in their lives and helped them reach their goals.



7 of 10

said the program made a large difference.

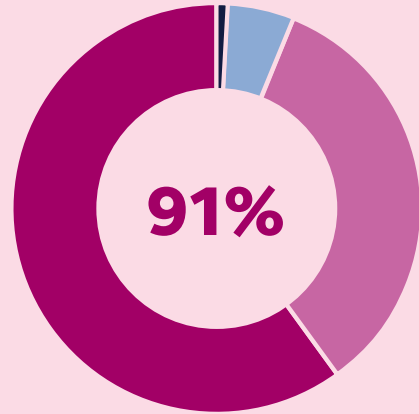


“This program helped me, and saved my life and my family; and I would highly recommend it to other struggling families.”

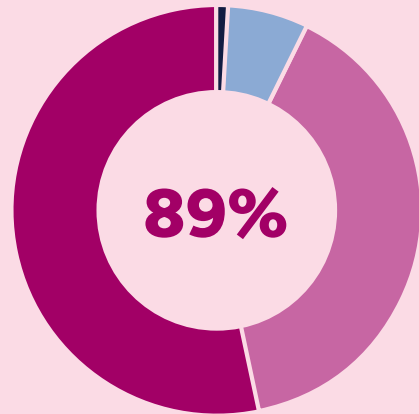
Reported outcomes

From 124 survey responses, families reported improved confidence, skills and access to services.

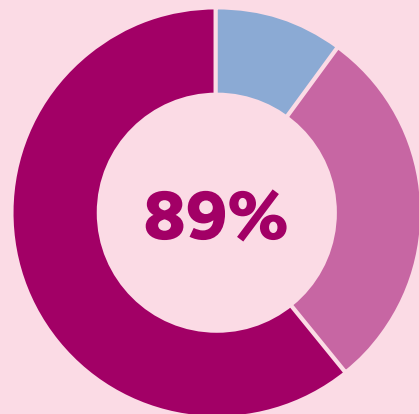
- Got a lot better
- Got a bit better
- No change
- Got worse



91% reported improved confidence as a parent



89% reported improved parenting skills



89% reported improved access to services

The biggest changes experienced by families



Self-confidence, parenting confidence and self-efficacy

“Having the confidence in myself to do well as a person and as a parent.”



Family preservation and reunification

“Having my daughter back in my care.”



Bonds and family relationships

“Helped our family communicate with each other.”

What helped families the most?



Respectful, empowering, therapeutic and reliable support

“Never judged, always supportive, always thinks outside the square for solution and I felt she genuinely cared for myself and my son.”



Practical, financial and case management support

“Helping me decide to get a psych evaluation to understand why I feel the things I do and be able to feel okay about getting treatment to get me through it.”



Knowledge and skills in parenting, child development and connection within the family

“Uniting has helped me to achieve my parenting skills. Above all, they have helped to have a connection with the children especially [child’s name].”

What barriers did families identify?

On average, each family identified 5 concurrent barriers in the survey, highlighting the complexity they are managing while engaging with the program. Common barriers included:

- Mental health and internal/personal struggles, such as self-doubt and the impacts of trauma
- Limited program flexibility or adaptability, such as challenges in attending appointments while working full-time
- Service access and navigation issues, such as long waitlists, difficulty understanding systems and not knowing what support options were available.

“The biggest barrier for me was not being able to know what services I could access to help me.”

Suggested program improvements

While most feedback was positive, with families saying they wouldn’t change anything about the program, some offered suggestions to strengthen the program including:

- More time in the program, or more frequent contact with their practitioner
- Greater consistency in practitioner/ better alignment of practitioner skills to family needs
- Better alignment of program scope, eligibility, or fit with family needs
- Additional funding or resources to support service delivery.

“Everything is absolutely perfect. I could not fault the service.”

Identified practice strengths

Uniting implements an evidence-based model of care, by using the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) Victorian Practice Modules and underpinned by Uniting's Therapeutic Model of Care for working with Children, Young People and Families.

While this was a grounded evaluation, where findings were drawn directly from the data and lived experiences of participants rather than tested against a predefined framework, the analysis revealed several practice strengths that closely align with the DFFH Victorian Practice Modules.

These included:

- Building trust through therapeutic relationships
- Strengths-based and affirming approach
- Holistic consumer-lead, family centred support
- Service navigation and advocacy
- Practical and flexible assistance.

"[My practitioner] was an amazing worker and through her support helped me to gain trust back into a system I had lost faith in."

Recommendations

Theme	Findings	Recommendations
Strong therapeutic relationships as the foundation of change	Quality of the consumer-practitioner relationship and engagement is critical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure practitioners continue to receive ongoing training in building and maintaining engagement and relational practice • Embed a Families Experience Survey early in service to identify relationship or fit issues • Include consumer partners on practitioner interview panels to assess relational skills
Skilled and supported practitioners delivering quality practice	Practitioners require a high level of training, skill and capacity to deliver the service effectively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain practitioner wellbeing through manageable caseloads and access to support, to preserve service quality • Leverage experienced practitioners as mentors to enhance practitioner skill • Consider shared meetings between practitioners and consumer partners to enable learning
Empowering families to lead their own change	Families that are empowered experience increased confidence, self-efficacy and goal achievement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforce voluntary, consumer-led engagement • Continue to invest in training to support building rapport and motivational approaches to strengthen family readiness and self-efficacy • Build a collaborative partnership with the family in all decision making
Addressing structural and systemic barriers	Housing instability, isolation and gaps in system access continue to represent barriers for families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deepen collaboration and integration with specialist supports such as housing and mental health services • Strengthen connections to community and kin networks to sustain support post-program

Continuing enhancements to family services delivery in Victoria

The Victorian Government's 2025–26 investment in Strong Families, Safe Children includes \$167.4 million to continue and modernise family services, shifting to a more sustainable, evidence-based platform by July 2026.

Key changes include 3 simplified streams – Connecting, Strengthening and Restoring Families – and expanded capacity in the Restoring Families stream, which draws directly on learnings from the FPR model.

This evaluation demonstrates that FPR is delivering strong outcomes for many families, and the planned scaling of its core elements is well aligned with the findings. In particular, strengthening the delivery of the foundational practice modules (Building and Maintaining Engagement; Preparing for Change) and embedding specialist supports and coordination roles will better position the service to ensure families experience holistic and targeted support that improves outcomes.



Conclusion

This evaluation demonstrates that Uniting's FPR Program is achieving significant and meaningful outcomes for participating families across Victoria.

While the results are highly positive, the evaluation also identified critical areas where program structures and systems can further evolve.

Involving consumer partners and practitioners in the evaluation process deepened the authenticity and relevance of the findings, and modelled the values of collaboration and respect which underpin effective family services.

These insights will inform ongoing service improvement and contribute to sector-wide learning about effective, family-centred approaches to preservation and reunification.

This evaluation affirms that when families are met with respect, belief, skilled relational and evidence-based practice, the FPR Program not only changes outcomes – it changes lives.

"The last few months of my life was the worst thing I've ever been through, if it weren't for Uniting, I'm not sure what I would have done, I thank you all so much."

Acknowledgements

We thank the families who completed the survey and shared their experiences to inform this evaluation. Their openness and reflections have been central to understanding the program's impact.

We acknowledge the valuable contributions of the consumer partners, practitioners and FPR Program leaders who formed part of the evaluation team. Their lived experience and professional insights shaped the analysis and strengthened the quality of the findings.

Our thanks extend to the Uniting's Family Services Governance Group for commissioning and supporting this evaluation, and to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing for their support of Uniting's FPR Program.

The future is bright.



About Uniting.

As one of Victoria's largest community service organisations, Uniting is committed to evidence-based, relationship-centred support that keeps families together, builds resilience and strengthens communities.



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