

Policy Brief

Family violence in family services evaluation report.

Key messages

- This evaluation project sought to understand the prevalence and nature of family violence within Uniting's family services programs.
- Uniting has found that **almost two-thirds of families supported by family services were experiencing family violence** at the time of intake.
- The top three forms of family violence reported were **emotional abuse, controlling behaviour, and coercion**.
- **Family services** are distinct programs that are neither primarily funded nor specifically designed to manage complex family violence cases.
- Blurred roles and responsibilities between family violence and general family services create risks for both families and practitioners.
- Most practitioners reported **at least one instance where the person using violence was present during a home visit**.
- Despite holding roles that are not designed to respond or manage complex family violence, the findings highlight the strength of Uniting's family services workforce in responding to family violence.

Background and context

Family services play a vital role in providing early intervention and support to families, strengthening parenting capacity, improving child wellbeing, and helping to prevent escalation into statutory involvement. Family violence services, on the other hand, are designed to respond directly to the harm caused by family violence, offering crisis support, safety planning, case management, legal assistance, and therapeutic recovery for victim-survivors, while also engaging with people who use violence to change their behaviours.

While these two service streams have distinct purposes, there is growing anecdotal evidence from family services practitioners that family violence is increasingly present with the families they support. This evaluation project sought to understand the prevalence and nature of family violence within Uniting's family services programs, including its frequency, severity, and most common forms.

Details of the research

A mixed-method approach was used in this evaluation including a voluntary survey of 72 practitioners and team leaders (representing 32% of our Victorian Family Services workforce), 2 focus groups, and 3 case studies including one from a consumer perspective.

The evaluation confirmed there is a significant presence and complexity of family violence within Uniting Family Services. Key findings include:

- On average, practitioners surveyed had a caseload of between 10-11 families, 65 per cent of which presented with family violence
- At intake, most of these families (69 per cent) were assessed as high risk, with 17 per cent low risk and 2 per cent extreme risk.
- A third of all families had at least one police referral for family violence
- Emotional abuse and coercion were found to be the most common forms of family violence.
- 63 per cent of practitioners reported at least one instance where the person using violence was present during a home visit.

Despite holding roles that are not designed to respond or manage complex family violence, the findings also highlighted the strength of the family services workforce in responding to family violence. By case closure, risk levels for families experiencing family violence had reduced substantially.

- 65 per cent were classified as low risk, 34 per cent high risk, and none at extreme risk (compared to 69 per cent high risk, 17 per cent low risk and 2 per cent extreme risk)

Findings on the prevalence of family violence in family services.

The evaluation found that families experiencing significant family violence are often inappropriately referred to family services, despite the program's role limitations in responding to high-risk cases. Referrals were frequently described as incomplete, inaccurate, or misdirected—commonly categorised as parenting support even where serious family violence was evident. Missing information, such as MARAM assessments, police involvement, and intervention orders, creates delays in families receiving the right support, increases practitioner workload, and heightens safety risks.

Implications for responding to high-risk family violence

Practitioners working in non-family violence specific roles face increased risks when responding to high-risk family violence, with potential impacts on both family safety and practitioner wellbeing, including stress, trauma, and exposure to dangerous situations. A key distinction between specialist family violence programs and general family services is the provision of outreach and in-home support, which can place practitioners in direct contact with the person using violence. In line with this, **63 per cent of practitioners reported at least one instance where the person using violence was present during a home visit**, highlighting the need for clear role boundaries, risk management strategies, and supports to ensure both families and practitioners remain safe.

Implications for perpetrator accountability

The *Royal Commission into Family Violence* emphasised that victim safety must be strengthened through a consistent and rigorous approach to perpetrator accountability, ensuring those who use violence are kept in view and supported to change their behaviour. The evaluation findings highlight the ongoing challenges in realising this intent within family services.

Practitioners reported concern about holding the person using violence accountable without escalating risks for victim survivors and children. Eighteen per cent of survey respondents identified risks to victim survivors as their primary concern, citing safety and wellbeing issues, the difficulty of escaping violence, limited supports, and the need for safe ways of communicating. These findings underline the importance of approaches that balance perpetrator accountability with minimising risks to victim survivors, ensuring families are supported safely and effectively.

Implications for child wellbeing

The evaluation highlights the significant complexities for maintaining the primary role of family services to improve and promote child wellbeing. The findings also indicate gaps in child-centred practice, particularly regarding adolescents who may be using family violence.

Findings on the nature of family violence in family services

The evaluation found that emotional abuse and coercive control are the most common forms of family violence encountered in family services. These non-physical forms of violence are often subtle and can be misunderstood within cultural practices and patriarchal family structures, making them difficult for victim survivors, families, and even practitioners to recognise. Many families, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, do not identify controlling or coercive behaviours as family violence, which can exacerbate risk and increase the complexity of intervention.

Implications for supporting diverse communities

The evaluation highlights the need to improve awareness and understanding of non-physical forms of family violence, particularly emotional abuse and coercive control, which are often subtle and unrecognised. This is especially important for strengthening support for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. In these communities, cultural norms can influence how coercive control manifests, and in certain contexts, family roles shaped by cultural and religious beliefs may be manipulated to justify or rationalise controlling behaviours in relationships.

Implications for the legal system, courts, and police supporting families experiencing high-risk family violence

The evaluation identified significant challenges for family services practitioners in navigating the legal system, courts, and police when supporting families experiencing high-risk family violence. Shared care arrangements and separate care orders can limit the ability of practitioners to provide effective support within program timeframes, particularly when court processes are slow or inaccessible. Practitioners also reported difficulties in ensuring breaches are addressed and investigated, highlighting the need for improved collaboration and relationship-building with family liaison officers and local police. Establishing clear roles, shared responsibilities, and direct lines of communication between practitioners and law enforcement is essential to enhance case management, reduce practitioner stress, and improve outcomes for victim survivors and children.

Recommendations.

Integrated Practice and Child Wellbeing

The 2024–25 Victorian Auditor-General report on The Orange Door found that progress on the Integrated Practice Framework and child wellbeing assessments remains incomplete. The Orange Door continues to rely on outdated guidance, inconsistent tools, and partially developed system management functions, meaning children and families may not receive consistent, evidence-informed support across sites.

Recommendation 1: The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing finalise and implement the Integrated Practice Framework, aligned with the MARAM framework and information-sharing legislation, to provide clear, consistent guidance for practitioners.

Recommendation 2: Introduce a single, mandated child wellbeing assessment tool to ensure all children are assessed consistently across hubs, prioritising their safety and wellbeing. These measures will strengthen coordinated service delivery, reduce variation in practice, and ensure families receive timely, evidence-informed support.

Family Services System Reform

The Family Services Platform reform presents an opportunity to strengthen referral pathways, ensuring families are connected to specialist family violence services where appropriate, and that family services can continue to provide early intervention and support to families, strengthening parenting capacity, improving child wellbeing, and helping to prevent escalation into statutory involvement. Clear, consistent referral pathways will help safeguard children and families, reduce practitioner risk, and ensure timely, evidence-informed support.

Recommendation 3: As part of the Family Services Platform reform, referral pathways must ensure the appropriateness of service offering, so that families are connected to the services best able to meet their needs.

Supporting culturally and linguistically diverse communities

Consistent with the Royal Commission's findings, people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities face additional barriers to obtaining help for family violence. Policy measures must support practitioners and communities to recognise and respond appropriately to these forms of abuse. Strengthening culturally responsive practice, ensuring access to professional interpreter

Recommendation 4: The Victorian Government develop and implement culturally responsive education, resources, and ensure professional interpreter services are trained in family violence to ensure practitioners and communities can identify and respond effectively to emotional abuse and coercive control, safeguarding children and victim survivors.

services trained in family violence, and providing targeted education and resources for both practitioners and families are critical to safeguarding children and victim survivors.

Greater awareness of non-physical forms of family violence

There is a need to strengthen education and awareness about non-physical forms of family violence, including emotional abuse and coercive control, and how these behaviours can negatively affect parenting, child wellbeing, and the risk of escalation. Public understanding of family violence often focuses on physical harm, leaving emotional and psychological abuse unrecognised and unaddressed. Enhancing awareness through targeted community education, culturally responsive campaigns, and accessible resources can help families, practitioners, and the broader community recognise these subtle forms of violence, support early intervention, and reduce harm to children and victim survivors.

Recommendation 5: The Victorian Government implement targeted public education and awareness initiatives to improve understanding of emotional abuse and coercive control, highlighting their impact on parenting and child wellbeing, and promoting early recognition and intervention by families, practitioners, and the broader community.