

# CHILD-CENTRED, FAMILY-FOCUSED SUPPORT



In this tool, you will find:

- » An overview of child-centred and family-focused practice
- » Principles to help guide child-centred and family-focused work
- » Links to additional resources

## KEY GUIDANCE

It is increasingly recognised children and young people experience family challenges differently from adults, and are clients in their own right. According to the New Zealand Children's Commission, "being child-centred is about elevating the status of children's interests, rights, and views in the work of your organisation. It involves considering the impact of decisions and processes on children, and seeking their input when appropriate to inform your work".

A family-focused approach is a way of working in partnership with families to help them identify needs, find solutions and share decision-making. Family-focused approaches recognise every family is different and adopt a broad definition of family to include extended family members and networks.

CaFIS providers are encouraged to work in child-centred and family-focused ways.

## WHAT IS CHILD-CENTRED PRACTICE?

Moore and Layton (2009) draw on research with children and young people to identify a number of child-centred principles that can help shape child protection and family support practice. The principles include:

### Children and young people's safety and wellbeing are a priority

Child-centred practice prioritises children's safety, and actively provides supports to families in a way that ensures children are protected from harm (so they *are safe*) while meeting their emotional needs (so they can *feel safe*). In instances where a child's safety is at risk, practitioners actively work to meet the child's safety needs even if this appears to be contrary to the wishes of parents. As individual children's safety needs can differ, child-centred services spend time identifying (and working with each child) to understand and meet their unique needs.

### Children are individuals with unique needs and wishes

Child-centred practice recognises every child is different and has unique needs, wishes and abilities. Child-centred practice recognises that during periods of crisis and difficulty, parents and families may not always be in a position to understand what is going on for a child or to appreciate their needs and wishes. Child-centred practitioners are attuned to the unique needs, talents, preferences and wishes of individual children. Child-centred practitioners help parents understand children's needs and wishes, even when they are uncomfortable to hear.

### Because children are usually best supported within their families, every effort should be made to assist families to support their children

Child-centred practice recognises families play an incredibly important part in the lives of children and young people. Child-centred services take time to talk with families about what they want for their children, how family problems affect their children, and the important role family members play in the life of a child in meeting their safety, development, and growth needs.

### Environments surrounding children need to be child-friendly and provide them with opportunities to develop and grow

Children thrive in environments which are not only safe and secure, but also give them opportunities to learn, to grow and develop. Child-centred support services work with families to foster environments that are safe and support growth for children.

Practitioners also take steps to ensure the way they work with children is safe, appropriate, responsive to their needs, child-friendly (using tools and approaches that are engaging, enjoyable and help make children feel comfortable) and give children lots of choices about how support is provided.

## Children need to be provided with information and given opportunities to participate in all decision-making that affects their lives

Children in families who are experiencing challenges often feel invisible, disempowered and ignored.

Child-centred practice involves:

- » a commitment to listening and to take account of children's needs and wishes when decisions are made about them
- » giving children opportunities to form their views about what they want and need
- » supporting children to have their say and to know how the information they have shared is being used
- » providing children with enough information so they feel understood, have confidence that supports will meet their and their family's needs and know what other supports are available to them.

## The best outcomes are often achieved in partnership with others who can assist children

Child centred practice identifies people who can assist families, help them build their strengths and find solutions to their problems. Child-centred services recognise they can't meet a child or family's needs alone. They work with others to ensure the child and family's broader needs are being met and assistance is ongoing and available when they need it most.

Child-centred practice recognises culture and community play an important role in the safety and wellbeing of children, and can empower and support parents to be the best parents they can be.

## WHAT IS A FAMILY-FOCUSED APPROACH?

A family-focused approach is one that places children at the centre but also considers what all family members want and need, how supports can be provided in a way that builds (rather than undermines) family relationships and strengths, and equips them to find solutions to the problems they face. Principles that inform a family-focused approach include:

### All families are different

Family-focused approaches recognise every family is different. Some families are headed by single parents, some by heterosexual or homosexual parents, by grandparents or kin, some are blended, some include non-biological members and some are constantly changing. Family-focused approaches begin by understanding who is considered "family" by each family member (this can sometimes be different for each family member and include people who are not related to an individual). It aims to build and strengthen these supportive bonds.

## All families have unique strengths, resources, challenges and experiences

As the makeup of families differ so do their experiences, past difficulties and successes, strengths, resources and opportunities. Family-focused practitioners spend time working with all family members to understand their family's unique story and to identify risks that can be reduced, traumas and stressors that need to be managed, strengths that can be fostered and opportunities to help the family meet their needs.

## Children's safety and wellbeing is dependent on the safety and wellbeing of other family members and the family as a whole

Children and young people's sense of safety and wellbeing is inextricably linked to the safety and wellbeing of their family members. Although child-centred practice recognises supports provided to families do not always lead to positive and direct outcomes for children, the opposite is equally true. Without helping families (as individuals and as a whole), practitioners cannot meet the needs of a child, of parents or of other family members.

## Parents and families need allies and supporters

Like child-centred work, family focused approaches recognise for parents and families to be the best they can be they need formal and informal supports from the wider community and support systems. During periods of chaos and challenge, many parents feel disempowered and have their confidence undermined by their experiences. Those working with families in a family-focused way aim to build family members' strengths and capacities, assist them to restore their confidence and to be optimistic about their, their children's and their families' futures.

### Disclaimer

This document has been prepared by the Commonwealth Department of Social Services (the Department) for the purpose of disseminating important information for the benefit of the public. While the Department has used its best endeavours to ensure the information included is correct as at the time of publication, the Department makes no representation or warranty about the accuracy, reliability, currency or completeness of any of the information provided. The information is provided on the understanding that the Department is not providing professional advice and individuals and organisations should obtain their own appropriate professional advice before relying on any of the information provided in this document.

#### Where to go for more information on this topic

“Child-centred practice” and “family focussed work” are terms that have been described in lots of different ways and sometimes other labels are used instead. When seeking further guidance, CaFIS providers might also consider advice given about child-aware, child-inclusive, child-informed, family-driven, family-oriented and family-centred work.

SNAICC (2016) Stronger Safer Together: A reflective practice resource and toolkit for services providing intensive and targeted support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families,  
<https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/SNAICC-Stronger-Safer-Together-LR-1.pdf>

FAHCSIA (2009) Father-inclusive practice guide: A tool to support the inclusion of fathers in a holistic approach to service delivery,  
[https://www.mengage.org.au/images/work/father\\_inclusive\\_practice.pdf](https://www.mengage.org.au/images/work/father_inclusive_practice.pdf)

Hall, Price-Robertson & Awram (2020) Engaging with parents when there are child protection concerns: key considerations, Emerging Minds  
<https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/engaging-with-parents-when-there-are-child-protection-concerns-key-considerations/>

Layton M & Moore T (2009) Kids Central Toolkit, Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/institutes-academies-and-centres/institute-of-child-protection-studies/kids-central-toolkit/tools-and-resources>

New Zealand Children’s Commissioner (2015) Being child-centred: elevating children’s interests in the work of your organisation,  
<https://www.occ.org.nz/assets/Publications/Being-Child-Centred.pdf>