

Child and Family Partnerships Framework

Introduction

Emerging Minds and the National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (the NWC) are committed to enabling the voice of children and families with experiences of adversity and resilience to shape and contribute to their work. Emerging Minds refers to these relationships and processes as Child and Family Partnerships (CaFP). This framework seeks to outline Emerging Minds' commitment, ethical considerations and strategies for enabling CaFP to occur.



Emerging Minds believes, based on its own and the broader literature evidence, that a partnerships approach with children and families will enhance the quality of products and activities developed and delivered by the NWC, and thereby, workforce programs and practice, and outcomes for children and their families.

Emerging Minds uses child and family partners (CaFPs) to provide unique and important perspectives (*experience-based knowledge or evidence*) which are valuable in terms of enhancing the quality of the products and outcomes for children and families, as well as the overall strategy and direction of the project. These perspectives are considered as valuable as those of other stakeholders such as practitioners (*practice-based knowledge/evidence*) and researchers (*research-based knowledge/evidence*).

Emerging Minds:

- Recognises that services, resources and projects designed in partnership with children and families better reflect their needs, preferences and aspirations making services more accessible, more useful, and more relevant to their local context.
- Strives to acknowledge, value and incorporate the perspectives and understandings of children and families with experiences of adversity and resilience, and to embed these in all areas of work. This includes resource development, but also resource conceptualisation and the overall strategy and direction of the project.
- Ensures that Child and Family Partnership practices are safe, purposeful, provide clarity regarding the extent to which participation will shape decision-making, and relevant to participants culture and circumstances.
- In relation to child partners, practices will comply with Emerging Minds' Child Safe Policy [under development], and will be age-appropriate, honouring of children's creativity and imagination, run by skilled facilitators and child-friendly in relation to location, timing and duration.
- Strives to ensure that children's and families' participation in partnership activities makes a positive contribution to their own wellbeing.
- Prioritises the wellbeing of child and family partners in partnership activities and will embed support, debriefing and evaluation within its partnership practices.
- Acknowledges partners' contributions in a variety of ways including providing reimbursement and remuneration to enable fair and just partnerships.

The NWC has developed a set of [10 key guiding principles](#) and two relate to the area of CaFP specifically:

Principle 9 – Children’s rights

This principle emphasises the need for child-centred processes which empower children to freely express their needs, and to be involved in discussions and decisions about their mental health, in order to improve decisions, attitudes and services for children.

Principle 10 – Child, family and practitioner voice

This principle emphasises that services designed collaboratively with children, families and practitioners tend to be more effective, more acceptable to the individuals and families using the service, and more relevant to their local context. Engaging with, and listening to, the views of children, families and practitioners is a strategy used by the NWC to improve outcomes for children and their families and implies more than simply consultation.



Engaging with child and family partners is believed to help products and services be as engaging and useful as possible, for those the NWC ultimately aims to assist children at risk of mental health issues and their families, and for intermediaries, the workforces involved in assisting them. In addition, staff and the NWC benefit from the engagement of partners, not only for the individual project they are involved with, but for the broader insights, data and capacity the staff and the NWC have for empowering the voice and agency of children and families within future products and activities.

The NWC recognises this approach requires additional planning, care, time and remuneration resources, particularly in the early stages of projects, and in the early stages of this approach in the organisation while efficiency of the approach is still being developed. Budget and time constraints are real barriers to its application.

What Emerging Minds have done to establish Child and Family Partnerships

Emerging Minds is in a strong position in terms of empowering CaFPs to enhance the quality of the organisation’s activities and service outcomes for children and families. Much has already been accomplished, and the organisation is at the stage of wanting to consolidate and extend its use. Emerging Minds aims to strive for continual improvement in this area of practice, and to be a leader in child and family partnerships work.

Key strategies undertaken to implement CaFP include:

- Through Board and leadership influence and the values and commitment of staff, CaFP have been embedded as a part of Emerging Minds’ core business.
- Formal policies and procedures and a suite of guiding resources have been developed to facilitate CaFP and ensure they follow best practice and are ethical in their application.
- Through leadership direction, CaFP have been embedded as a part of all staff’s responsibilities.
- Emerging Minds have employed dedicated CaFP Coordinators to ensure an environment exists where CaFP can be successful, and to support other staff in implementing CaFP participation as a part of their work.
- Emerging Minds have developed a ‘menu of participation’ and a ‘ladder of activities’ to help staff consider their work in the CaFP space. More information on these is below.

Menu of participation

Below is a diagram of the four broad types of partnership approaches that have been used across NWC activities, on a continuum from lower to higher levels of empowerment and agency/influence of partners within activities. This model conceptualises consultation and collaboration involve shared but not equal power, whereas co-design approaches involve shared power, and a partner-led approach involves delegation of power to partners. NWC staff are able to consider, select and tailor approaches according to their specific activity or project needs.

A *consultation* approach refers to intentionally seeking out the perspectives and views of child and family partners, to consider in decisions about product or activity content, format and processes. Consultations may take place across any of the range of project activities including planning, design and development, review, communications and marketing, and implementation and dissemination. A consultation approach may involve, for example, seeking partner feedback on a draft product prior to its finalisation and implementation.

A *collaboration* approach is more involved and may involve, for example, seeking partner input and feedback regarding project or process conceptualisation, planning, design and development, and finalisation.

A *co-design* approach includes child and family partners as essentially equal partners in decisions regarding the conceptualisation, design and development of projects or processes. Partners may also be engaged in other aspects of co-production, such as co-delivery and co-evaluation.

A *partner-led* approach refers to partners being empowered to lead projects across all stages and be the ultimate decisions-makers across all aspects of the project. Partner-led approaches are uncommon currently within the NWC.

All of these approaches are valuable and worth pursuing. All of them can be respectful, safe and empowering for CaFPs and can contribute significantly to the work of the NWC.

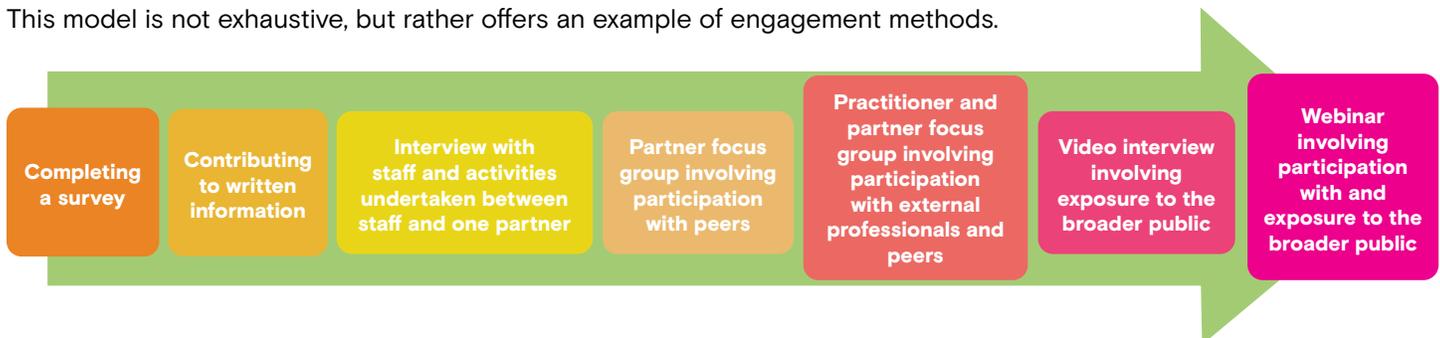
It is important to honour the CaFP process and strive to correctly label the approach we are undertaking, remembering that all are valuable and worth pursuing at different times for different reasons. In many spaces there can be confusion between consultation and codesign, for more on this issue, see [Consultation or Codesign?](#).



Ladder of activities

As a general guide, the following are examples of engagement methods, organised on a continuum from lesser exposure to more exposure for partners. Generally, partners will start at the lower end and step through to methods on the higher end (if they want to) as their relationships, trust and knowledge about the NWC builds. Influencing factors may include CaFPs desired level of anonymity, their willingness and confidence to talk openly or in depth about their experiences and views (ie self-disclosure), and their willingness and confidence to talk with one or more people, including peers, practitioners or the broader public (ie within public forums or webinars). NWC staff (with the support of CaFP Coordinators) are able to consider this range of options, and discuss with partners their interest or willingness to use any of these, in deciding methods to use for a given project.

This model is not exhaustive, but rather offers an example of engagement methods.



What Emerging Minds staff can do to ensure Child and Family Partnerships occur

Emerging Minds staff may undertake the following strategies to ensure CaFP occur within their work:

- Consult with CaFP Coordinators as early as possible within all processes and projects
- Consider the 'menu of participation' and 'ladder of activities' outlined above
- Refer to this framework, policies, procedures and guiding resources as appropriate
- Value CaFPs and have ongoing discussions about their involvement
- Maintain relationships with existing CaFPs (also referred to as our 'CaFP pool'). This includes informing people when resources they helped develop are launched, and keeping in touch during periods of low involvement.

- Seek new CaFPs with relevant experience through new and existing networks. This information sheet may be a useful resource to utilise, or staff may wish to develop their own project specific document. This template may also be useful. CaFP Coordinators can advise and assist with this process.
- Utilise literature and reports that have already published the voices of children and families. Examples of this include the [Create Foundations reports](#) and [children's commissioners](#).
- Engage with peak consumer, carer, child and family groups to seek their voices. Examples of such groups include [Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter \(FISH\)](#) and the [National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum](#). Note that not all members of these groups will be parents, so being clear about what you require when you approach them is important.
- Some additional information regarding key considerations is outlined below.

When to include child and family partners

When to engage child and family partners in a given project or process may depend on the budget and timelines. Having said this, consideration and planning in relation to their involvement ideally takes place in the early planning stages of projects, as set out in the Child and Family Partnerships Engagement Procedure. NWC templates and guidelines also assist with this process.

In terms of when child and family partners could be included, the literature indicates there are benefits for including partners as early as possible and in as many aspects of the project as possible, including in the project planning stage.

Planning the involvement of child and family partners in a given project is important. Aspects of the project planning may need to be partially clarified before involving child and family partners and other stakeholders, such as the:

- project context and scope
- resources/budget (e.g. for remuneration of partners and other stakeholders, and time for project staff to analyse and integrate input from partners)
- timelines
- what is non-negotiable about the project (i.e. what needs to/must happen)
- who the relevant partners would be, with an interest in the project and who may be impacted by the project
- what would the purpose of their involvement/their role be.



Contribution in project conceptualisation could involve for example, providing experienced-based knowledge regarding defining the need/problem, project scope, target group, project aims and objectives, methods/activities, and identification of stakeholders.

The importance of relationship

The purpose of the involvement of child and family partners is to enhance practices of workforces working for the benefit of children and families. For this to be successful, it is important that child and family partnership work is *relationship-based*. This means that a positive and effective working relationship between staff and partners is a critical factor that underpins the collaborative work together, including when gathering input or feedback, and when making decisions about the project.

Whether using consultation, collaboration, co-design or partner-led approaches, effective relationship processes (e.g. respect, authenticity, transparency, effective communication, recognising people's discomfort or distress, holding space for emotions, and providing support throughout periods of participation) are critical, and determine the experience the partners have with the NWC, as well as the project outcomes that are possible.

It is important to be aware that there are different kinds of relationships between CaFPs and the NWC including:

- One-off and short-term partnerships where people are involved for a time limited and specific task only.
- Ongoing partnerships. These may evolve from short-term partnerships. These partnerships are deep, rich, can last for many years and are a unique and powerful source of guidance and advice.
- Partnerships where another organisation is the relationship lead. These occur when we seek partners through professionals who have an existing relationship with the partner and are willing and best placed to take on the primary relationship/supportive role.

Duty of care

The NWC does have a *duty of care* for the child and family partners it engages and works with. It is paramount that all NWC staff undertake sufficient planning and care to ensure that in their involvement with the partner, they (and the NWC) do no harm. Staff within the NWC have a range of skills and confidence in relation to working directly with partners, some may feel very comfortable. For others, their concerns about their lack of experience in this area, and fear of doing harm, may lead them to want to avoid working directly with partners. All staff are able to consult with the CaFP Coordinators and gain support as needed.

Advice from some of Emerging Minds' long-term partners regarding duty of care and risk include that:

- a mindful approach to the work, including picking up early on any distress being experienced by partners and offering suitable support, will help to ensure no harm is done;
- there will be mistakes made as staff are learning how to use this approach, but these mistakes are generally manageable within a relationship-based approach which pays attention to how the partner is 'travelling' with the work, shows respect, uses clear and helpful communication and offers suitable support when needed;
- staff offer partners the 'dignity of risk' by taking the steps to engage them in this work, and to believe in their strengths and resiliency in the face of adversities they have faced.
- outweighing the risks are benefits to be gained not only for project outcomes but for child and family partners, in terms of feeling they are contributing their at times 'hard won' knowledge and skills to improve services and products, and even being able to strengthen their positive narratives about themselves and their lives.
- *trauma-informed practice* and *culturally-affirmative practices* help reduce the likelihood of harms and optimise the benefits of the exchange.

The benefits generally outweigh the risks and costs. Policies and procedures, this framework, and accessibility of CaFP Coordinators all intend to reduce risk and optimise gains from the partnership approach.

Creating a positive experience

The quality of CaFPs experience is important, including¹:

- their experience of being invited to participate and the information provided to assist their decision to participate (e.g. context, purpose, remuneration process, informed consent, time taken/given)
- clarity about roles and responsibilities, including lines of reporting and accountability are provided (ie if they wished to provide feedback about their experience with someone other than who they directly worked with)
- the flexibility provided regarding the timing and method of engagement/providing input (e.g. email, phone, in person, individual/group)
- the accessibility (i.e. transport, disability), quality of the venue, catering, introduction, facilitation (e.g. co-delivery by a partner) for an event (e.g. focus group)



¹ From the Working Together Toolkit

- information communicated in a way they could understand, including use of interpreters and translations where needed
- explanation about how their input will be used to influence decisions
- discussion regarding confidentiality, uses of input and limits to use
- discussion regarding support available and process if anyone experiences distress or reacts to something during their involvement
- felt comfortable sharing their experience and opinions
- felt input was acknowledged and valued
- sufficient time was available to participate effectively (e.g. to be fully informed at each step, be 'touch-base' as needed, to build a trusting/comfortable relationship with project staff, to have additional communications as needed)
- staff were understanding and supportive
- how different views and perspectives were managed
- explanation of next steps and when and how they will be kept informed, and for this to be followed through (i.e. even if project timelines change, partners are communicated with in the timelines expected or otherwise in a timely way, and advised of these changes)
- the participation payment process.

Power imbalances

When working in this space, it can help to reflect that staff have their own diverse experiences of adversity too: it's not 'them' and 'us'. However, for family partners coming into this space it can feel that there is very much a power imbalance between the NWC and themselves. Working to create a respectful culture of collaboration sees us all as people of equal value with diverse experiences. It can also help to recognise children and families as experts in their own stories and experiences and to make a conscious effort not to privilege specific types of knowledge (e.g. research and practitioner). The goal is to be equals in partnership, or at the very least to minimise the power imbalance. Be honest with participants about how final decisions will be made (e.g. their level of influence within the organisation). Continual awareness around this issue and checking in with the people you partner with will be important moving forward.

Handling and use of partner data

Any records which include name and contact information regarding a partner are kept in a limited access folder in the Emerging Minds system. Some partners prefer the use of aliases within NWC records, presentations, or recordings.

Data collected regarding partners may be *sensitive* in nature and *identifying* also, so needs to be handled with care.

Some relevant guiding resources for video footage and other mechanisms for sharing publicly are the ['Talking about your children and family publicly'](#) process document, ['Things to consider before doing a webinar'](#) and ['Things to consider before doing a video interview'](#).

Infants, children and young people

Prior to involving children and young people, staff are to carefully consider the appropriateness of this and any risk to child safety or wellbeing. If there is significant risk, it is important to recognise this and consider other ways to access the voices of children, including through:

- Children's voices that have already been published in research and through relevant peak bodies and Children's Commissioners.
- People who are now adults and who grew up in families experiencing adversity may reflect on their childhood experiences and share their wisdom.
- Parents who are living with adversity often have great insights into the worlds of their own children: their strengths, vulnerabilities, needs and desires.

In relation to child partners, activities will be age-appropriate, honouring of their creativity and imagination, run by skilled facilitators and child-friendly in relation to location, timing and duration. Refer to the [Child and Family Partnership Engagement Procedure](#) and consult with CaFP Coordinators for more information.

First Nations family partners

First Nations family partners make significant and essential contributions to the work of the NWC.

This is done through a variety of strategies including:

- First Nations family partners who contribute to generic NWC resources
- First Nations family partners who contribute to culturally specific resources in partnership with the Healing Foundation
- First Nations family voices who are represented through the national First Nations Consultancy Group who inform and advise Emerging Minds and the work of the NWC.

Prior to undertaking any work with First Nations family partners, all staff are required to consult with the First Nations Social and Emotional Wellbeing Lead.

