



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

Skills for responding to harmful service experiences

Definitions

We know that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' includes the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child. We also appreciate that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

Money, housing and health

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who've been through tough times to spark hope and give you new ideas for how to get through harmful service experiences as a family.

When our families are facing difficulties outside our control, like money struggles, poverty, housing issues or homelessness, we often need to reach out to services. Some service workers and volunteers meet us with care and provide life-sustaining support. But interactions with services can sometimes cause families harm, humiliation or distress. If this has happened to you, we hope the skills shared by other families in this resource might give you some ideas for how to respond, heal and recover.

Making a complaint ...

... can be empowering and create change

'I've made a complaint about a worker when they were really rude unnecessarily. And I've advised other people to do the same if I've heard stories that are unjust. If you could turn that lens away from yourself and outside, that's one way of being an activist. And that doesn't mean going to marches and things. I didn't have the energy or the ability to do that. It means doing it in whatever capacity that you can. I think it's really, really important. I tried to do that in the times I was able to. Standing up against ignorance and discrimination.'

... can take a lot of time

'One way to complain is when you just get angry and you say then and there, you know, "your service is stupid." That's the one way, and it's completely valid, but that's probably not gonna be that efficient. So have a think about why you're complaining and what you want to complain about. So if you want your complaint to have an impact, then you wait till you've calmed down and you write it out and you work out how you're gonna do it. Are you going to do it in writing? Are you going to phone someone? Does the organisation have a complaints process? You can say, "I want to hear what the resolution is," and you can ask for it to be anonymous or to have your name to it. So you need to put some time into it. And then if you're going to do that, you've gotta think, is it worth it? You know, how important is this to me?'

... can be worth it, but still give an unfair outcome

'I had one experience that was distressing and I made a complaint and the complaint went nowhere. And there was so much emotion and it was completely wrong and unfair. Sometimes you've just gotta let it go. And that's what I decided to do with this service, to just let it go. Even though I knew that it was wrong completely and I knew that they made assumptions and judgements and did the wrong thing, I had to let it go.'

Talking to our children when services are harmful

Some ways to explain how 'the system' doesn't always work

'If the kids were with me when services were harmful, even if they didn't fully understand it, I would try and talk to them about what happened, and explain why it was wrong and unfair.'

'When we experience unhelpful services, if the kids witnessed it or are aware of it, I'll turn the blame back around onto the social injustice. Letting them know that it's not us that's the problem, it's the system and the system doesn't always work.'

Some ways to explain to children when we lose our stability

'There were times when I got really upset with workers. In one homeless refuge, we only had small bags of possessions I held onto like they were gold, it was all we had. To anyone else it was s*** but it was important to us. The workers had left our belongings outside and they got rained on.'

'I literally lost it. I screamed, got hysterical. I completely lost it. It was a traumatic response. My kids were all there. My eldest came in and grabbed me and hugged me and said something to the worker like, "Can't you do something?" but they didn't.'

'It was scary for my kids – I was their only person, we'd lost everything. I was the only stability in their lives. To see their stability not be stable was scary for them. They needed a rock and I wasn't that rock for them.'

'Afterwards, I said to the kids what I used to say a lot when I lost control in those days. I'd say: "I am still really upset over things that happened, it's really hard. I'm sorry I lost control. I'm doing my best, but it's so hard to recover from this and what's happened to us, and what the workers did was wrong." It was about reassuring them that this was not because of who I was, but because of our circumstances. They could understand my behaviour in context. I had to have these conversations a lot, many, many times.'

Some ways to explain we are not broken, and our pain makes sense

'I would say think about teaching your children the skills of understanding the situation. If you are really broken down by something and your kids just see their parent really struggling, cranky, not present, and the parent doesn't have the capability to have that conversation; to say, "It's not you, it's not me, it's this outside issue" ... then the kids just see Mum, you know, "effing up". But if you can have the skills to be able to say, "Yeah, I'm really messing up right now and I don't like who I am, but it's not me and it's not you, it's this ..." then that teaches them that you can have these bad moments, but it doesn't mean it's gonna be like that forever. And you don't have to take that on as something that's a part of you because you are teaching them to externalise it and to put things where they're meant to be.'

‘When we were homeless and going through the refuges, there was one particular refuge, which is really, really, really bad. When talking to my kids, I was able to explain the treatment that we got at this refuge in the wider context of the inadequacies of the system. The kids saw me at my very worst in that refuge. They saw me not functioning, but I was able to explain that for them. I think they could see that I was suffering under the weight of all the stuff that we’d been going through.’

‘Also, you may not feel ready to reflect on poor or unfair treatment by services at the time. You might not feel ready to revisit it until much later down the track. It’s never too late to bring this up and reflect on it. If it’s much later, I have found this can also be a way to open up a conversation about what happened with my kids and together reframe what happened from an experience of distress and disempowerment to one of “We did what we needed to and survived a broken, unfair system.”’

Check out the following age-appropriate guides on planning and having conversations with children.

- [Communicating with your baby during tough times](#)
- [Communicating with your toddler during tough times](#)
- [Communicating with your primary school-age child during tough times](#)
- [Communicating with your teenager during tough times](#)

Learning which services are most supportive

‘Over time, we have found which services are the ones that are genuine and really willing to help you and not just you, but your family as well.’

Sometimes you may be able to find community networks online where information is shared about culturally safe services and experiences others have had.

Taking care of ourselves

‘Services can leave us feeling terrible, and this can impact our parenting. So I do grounding exercises. Or maybe music, going for a walk, or some way of taking frustration out somewhere else before you put yourself into a situation. I’ve been in that position too, where I’ve had the kids with us when I’ve had to deal with harmful services, and then maybe we can do something as a family like go to a playground afterwards.’

“

I remember feeling really, really bored and cooped up when visiting services. I have ADHD so I really struggled having to sit in stuffy offices all the time. One thing Mum did which was so clever, is we would always walk past a park. I always thought it was a fluke, but now I realise it was deliberate to seek out parks or green spaces so we could run around and be feral children and it wouldn’t matter.

ELLIOT, YOUNG PERSON, KAURNA LAND, LOOKING BACK ON THEIR CHILDHOOD

‘In situations where I’ve had bad experiences, self-care is really important. To come home and have a bath or shower or find someone that you can talk to about it – not one of the kids – but like a friend or a support worker, or your partner or whoever, and just decompress and get it out. Because sometimes you’ve gotta let it go. If you hang onto it, you are frustrated, you are agitated, irritated, you can’t sleep properly; then that leads into being cranky the next day and that impacts your kids; then it’s even harder for everyone.’

Take a moment to think about...



- When you feel distressed, what helps you feel grounded or return to being calm?
- Is this something you could teach your children about as well?



VIOLET, 7 YEARS OLD

Holding on to dignity

‘The expectation that I should be grateful... why should I be grateful that this charity, that has so much money, is giving me their pittance so that I can eat in an unjust society? The ability to say “f*** you” to the system and services (in your head!) helps you avoid being taken down, because you keep your dignity.’

‘When my son and I were really in the thick of things and the service provider was being very unhelpful and actually obstructive to us getting the help we needed, I think back on how I kept my dignity because I spoke up for him and me, and kept my cool. I felt like it was the only thing I had control over at the time and makes me feel proud that I managed to do that.’

“

Today I feel better not because of the professionals, but because of all the effort my mum has put in to help me.

13-YEAR-OLD WITH A CULTURALLY DIVERSE BACKGROUND LIVING WITH DISABILITY, VICTORIA, IN *CHECKING IN WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE*¹

Take a moment to think about...



- What stands out to you from reading these stories?
- Do these stories give you any new ideas for navigating services for your family?
- Is there anything you would like to do now after reading this resource?

When we’ve had harmful service experiences it can be hard to believe that there are services and workers out there that will meet us where we are at, walk alongside us, and do their best to meet our family’s needs with care and respect. We hope that the stories shared by families in this resource might not only give you some ideas for how to respond to services, but also that it may encourage services and systems to do better.

The stories we have collected in the following resource might offer some hope and be a reminder of what’s possible: [Collaboration and care between families and service providers.](#)

Dive deeper into podcasts

- In the podcast episode [When Centrelink makes you cry](#), Peta shares her experience of navigating Centrelink on the disability pension.
- In [Dealing with difficulties accessing care](#) we hear the stories of Imogen, Alex and Jeanette, and what they did to get the right help for eating disorders, as experienced by themselves or a loved one.
- The Consumer Coach has a few useful podcast episodes including [Navigating government agencies](#) and [Back to basics](#) on accessing accommodation and food assistance.

Services and resources that you may find helpful

Remember that not all these services will be available to every family. And for some of these services, you might need to use the skills shared by other families in this fact sheet.

Practical

- If you need immediate practical support, search 'emergency assistance' or 'emergency relief' online along with your location.
- The Smith Family [helps children overcome educational inequality caused by poverty](#).
- Foodbank can help you [find free or cheap food locally](#).
- If you're feeling overwhelmed and need some help in dealing with your financial stress, the National Debt Helpline (NDH) can [help you access a financial counsellor](#), who can help you manage bill payments. The NDH can also connect you to specialist services that can help women who have experienced domestic violence to take steps to protect their financial safety. If you're unsure, read more about [what financial counselling is](#).

- If you are working, your employer might offer leave for people experiencing family violence. This might be paid or unpaid, but may allow you to take time off work without putting your job in jeopardy.
- Centrelink provides [information on payments available to help with the cost of raising children](#).
- Raising Children Network also has [information on child, parent and family services](#).

Advocates and legal support

- Try searching 'advocacy service' and your location online. Advocacy services or organisations provide information and support to help you make decisions about and access the right services to get what you need.
- There are a range of [services that can assist you with a legal problem](#). Different legal assistance providers operate in all states and territories. Each of these services provide different levels of legal information and advice.
- Community Legal Centres Australia also has links to [organisations that might be able to help you with a legal problem](#).
- 1800RESPECT offers [support for people impacted by domestic, family or sexual violence](#). You may also want to refer to this list of [women's legal services by location](#).
- Disability Advocacy Network Australia has some information to help you find [advocacy services in your area](#).
- If your children were removed from your care, or they may be at risk of being removed, check out [FISH, an organisation that supports families with children in the child protection and out-of-home-care systems](#). You can [talk to a peer worker by calling 1300 942 598](#).
- The Australian Human Rights Commission can provide [support for discrimination and breaches of human rights](#).

- Children’s Commissioners and Guardians across Australia might be able to assist with complaint processes – select from the following:
 - [Australian Capital Territory: ACT Human Rights Commission](#)
 - [Northern Territory: The Office of the Children’s Commissioner](#)
 - [New South Wales: Office of the Advocate for Young People](#)
 - [South Australia: Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People](#)
 - [Tasmania: Commissioner for Children and Young People](#)
 - [Victoria: Commission for Children and Young People](#)
 - [Western Australia: Commissioner for Children and Young People](#)
- If you can, you might want to contact your local Member of Parliament (MP) or council to let them know about the barriers you are up against and what kinds of things might make a difference. [Search for your federal MP](#), or type ‘who is my state MP’ into Google and follow this guide on [how to write a letter to your MP](#).

More Money, housing and health resources

Have a look at the following options and choose what feels right for you and your family.

- [Skills for navigating services](#)
- [Collaboration and care between families and service providers](#)

AVAILABLE HERE

View all Money, housing and health resources



Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family? [First check out our practitioner guide.](#)

Those working in frontline roles may also want to read [For service workers: Collaboration and care between families and providers](#)

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References

1. The Commission for Children and Young People, Victoria. (2021). [Checking in with children and young people: Youth survey, November 2020 to February 2021](#). Melbourne: CCYP.