

# Engagement of birth parents involved in the child protection system: A scoping review of frameworks, policies, and practice guides

This scoping review by the Parenting Research Centre identifies and summarises strategies and barriers to engagement with parents involved in child protection. The findings will help inform a parent engagement strategy.

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#### Disclaimer

This report is the responsibility of the Parenting Research Centre and does not necessarily reflect the views of the New South Wales Government. The scoping review was conducted in March 2017. Readers are advised to consider new evidence arising since the publication of this review.

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# Contents

<b>1. Executive summary .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. Overview.....	1
1.2. Methods.....	1
1.3. Findings .....	2
1.3.1. Documents identified .....	2
1.3.2. Engagement strategies .....	2
1.3.3. Engaging specific populations.....	3
1.3.4. When strategies are not working.....	5
1.3.5. Barriers to engagement .....	5
1.4. Factors to consider when implementing strategies in the New South Wales context .....	5
1.4.1. Building engagement requires leadership by decision- makers in the child protection system .....	6
1.4.2. Engagement requires a multi-strategy approach .....	6
1.4.3. Early engagement can build strong relationships.....	6
1.4.4. All family members need support to engage.....	6
1.4.5. The impact of the history of forced removal on engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.....	6
1.4.6. The values, beliefs and needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families .....	6
1.4.7. The diverse circumstances of parents with a child in care .....	7
1.4.8. Working with domestic and family violence requires additional support.....	7
1.4.9. Some engagement strategies may be new to parents and workers .....	7
1.4.10. Further research is required to understand engagement during the process of guardianship and open adoption .....	7
1.4.11. Effectiveness of engagement strategies is unknown .....	7
1.4.12. The engagement process is only one component of effective service provision.....	7
1.5. Limitations.....	8
1.6. Conclusions .....	8
<b>2. Introduction .....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1. Overview.....	9

2.2.	Background.....	9
2.2.1.	Child protection .....	9
2.2.2.	Child protection in New South Wales.....	10
2.2.3.	Parent engagement .....	11
2.3.	Objective.....	12
2.4.	Research questions .....	12
<b>3.</b>	<b>Methodology.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>Results .....</b>	<b>14</b>
4.1.	Documents identified .....	14
4.2.	Strategies for engaging parents.....	20
4.2.1.	Ensure service culture supports engagement.....	21
4.2.2.	Use supportive and strengths-based behaviours.....	22
4.2.3.	Be flexible .....	24
4.2.4.	Resource agencies appropriately.....	26
4.2.5.	Go where the parents are .....	27
4.2.6.	Demonstrate respect.....	28
4.2.7.	Address parents' practical needs .....	29
4.2.8.	Communicate clearly .....	30
4.2.9.	Focus on empowering parents.....	31
4.2.10.	Create a good first impression .....	32
4.2.11.	Maintain a non-judgemental stance .....	33
4.2.12.	Provide sufficient time for engagement.....	33
4.2.13.	Streamline service provision .....	34
4.2.14.	Adopt culturally appropriate practice.....	34
4.3.	Strategies for engaging specific populations.....	34
4.3.1.	Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.....	34
4.3.2.	Engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families.....	35
4.3.3.	Engagement between birth parents and foster carers .....	36
4.3.4.	Engaging clients who are perpetrators of domestic and family violence .....	37
4.4.	When strategies are not working .....	38
4.5.	Barriers to engagement .....	38
4.5.1.	Client factors.....	39
4.5.2.	Worker factors.....	40
4.5.3.	Service factors .....	40

4.5.4. Contextual factors .....	40
<b>5. Discussion.....</b>	<b>42</b>
5.1. Summary of findings .....	42
5.1.1. Strategies identified .....	42
5.1.2. Barriers to engagement .....	43
5.2. Gaps in the findings .....	43
5.3. Factors to consider when implementing strategies in the New South Wales context .....	44
5.3.1. Building engagement requires leadership by decision- makers in the child protection system .....	44
5.3.2. Engagement requires a multi-strategy approach .....	45
5.3.3. Early engagement can build strong relationships.....	45
5.3.4. All family members need support to engage.....	45
5.3.5. The impact of the history of forced removal on engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.....	45
5.3.6. The values, beliefs and needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families .....	46
5.3.7. The diverse circumstances of families with a child in care.....	46
5.3.8. Working with domestic and family violence requires additional support.....	46
5.3.9. Some engagement strategies may be new to parents and workers .....	46
5.3.10. Further research is required to understand engagement during the process of guardianship and open adoption .....	46
5.3.11. Effectiveness of engagement strategies is unknown .....	47
5.3.12. The engagement process is only one component of effective service provision.....	47
5.4. Limitations.....	47
5.5. Conclusion .....	47
<b>6. References.....</b>	<b>48</b>

## GLOSSARY

<b>Best Interests Case Practice Model</b>	<p>'The Best interests case practice model provides a foundation for working with children, including the unborn child, young people and families. It aims to reflect the new case practice directions arising from the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (CYFA) and the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005.' It is 'designed to inform and support professional practice in family services, child protection and placement and support services' and 'aims to achieve successful outcomes for children and their families'.</p> <p>Source: Victoria Department of Human Services (<a href="http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au">www.dhs.vic.gov.au</a>)</p>
<b>Caring Dads: Safer Children Programme</b>	<p>Caring Dads: Safer Children (CDSC) is a group work program to help improve the parenting behaviour of fathers whose children have experienced living with domestic abuse.</p> <p>Source: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (<a href="http://www.nspcc.org.uk">www.nspcc.org.uk</a>)</p>
<b>Child protection continuum</b>	<p>The child protection system exists on a continuum from prevention to restoration services or permanent out-of-home care. Child welfare systems are complex and vary by state however child welfare systems typically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Receive and investigate reports of possible child abuse and neglect</li> <li>- Provide services to families that need assistance in the protection and care of their children</li> <li>- Arrange for children to live with kin or with foster families when they are not safe at home</li> <li>- Arrange for reunification, adoption, or other permanent family connections for children leaving foster care</li> </ul> <p>Source: Child Welfare Information Gateway (<a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov">www.childwelfare.gov</a>)</p>
<b>Child protection system</b>	<p>Child protection involves services that provide assistance, care, and protection to children who are suspected of or are vulnerable to being neglected or harmed.</p> <p>In Australia, state and territory governments are responsible for the operation of child protection services. Departments of child protection organise investigations into allegations of child abuse or neglect to then determine the level of involvement and intervention that is required to ensure the safety of the child in question.</p> <p>Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (<a href="http://www.aihw.gov.au/child-protection">www.aihw.gov.au/child-protection</a>)</p>
<b>Connections Project</b>	<p>A three-year collaborative research demonstration between a large private agency and the Washington State Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) established in 2001. The overall goal of the project, which served young children from infancy to age six, was to create strong, supportive connections among birth families, foster families, children, and the child welfare system.</p> <p>Source: Gerring et al. (2008)</p>
<b>Culturally appropriate programs/approach</b>	<p>Cultural competence is a 'set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or amongst professionals and enables that system, agency, or those</p>

	<p>professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. A culturally competent system of care acknowledges and incorporates—at all levels—the importance of culture, the assessment of cross-cultural relations, vigilance towards the dynamics that result from cultural differences, the expansion of cultural knowledge, and the adaptation of services to meet culturally-unique needs.’</p> <p>Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (<a href="http://www.aihw.gov.au">www.aihw.gov.au</a>)</p>
<b>Engagement</b>	<p>Engagement refers to the establishment of effective relationships between parents and service personnel in which they form a shared understanding of goals and shared commitment to supporting children and young people.</p> <p>Source: NSW Family and Community Services (<a href="http://www.community.nsw.gov.au">www.community.nsw.gov.au</a>)</p>
<b>Engaging Hard to Reach Families and Children study</b>	<p>A study undertaken by Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) as part of the national evaluation (2004–2008) of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) 2004–2009.</p> <p>The study examines how services and activities have engaged and sought to engage families and children considered hard-to-reach, the challenges encountered, and how additional supports might enhance reach and engagement.</p> <p>Source: Australian Government Department of Social Services (<a href="http://www.dss.gov.au">www.dss.gov.au</a>)</p>
<b>Family-centred practice</b>	<p>Family-centred practice is ‘a way of working with families, both formally and informally, across service systems to enhance their capacity to care for and protect their children. It focuses on children’s safety and needs within the context of their families and communities and builds on families’ strengths to achieve optimal outcomes. Families are defined broadly to include birth, blended, kinship, and foster and adoptive families.’</p> <p>Source: Child Welfare Information Gateway (<a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov">www.childwelfare.gov</a>)</p>
<b>Family Group Decision Making</b>	<p>‘Family group decision-making is a generic term that includes a number of approaches in which family members are brought together to make decisions about how to care for their children and develop a plan for services. Different names used for this type of intervention include family team conferencing, family team meetings, family group conferencing, family team decision-making, family unity meetings, and team decision-making. Approaches differ in various aspects, but most consist of several phases and employ a trained facilitator or coordinator.’</p> <p>Source: Child Welfare Information Gateway (<a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov">www.childwelfare.gov</a>)</p>
<b>Family Support Program</b>	<p>The Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) supports families to better manage life’s transitions through the Family Support Program (FSP). The Family Support Program aims to: ensure children at risk are protected; contribute to building stronger, more resilient communities; and better target its services to vulnerable and disadvantaged families.</p>

	Source: Australian Government Department of Social Services ( <a href="http://www.dss.gov.au">www.dss.gov.au</a> )
<b>Family teaming</b>	<p>Family teaming approaches aim to 'involve families and children in addressing a child's safety, wellbeing and permanence. Family teaming approaches are collaborative and strengths-based and are rooted in the belief that children's outcomes improve when families are involved in decision making and when team members share responsibility for getting children safely out of the child welfare system and living with family. In some cases, family teaming takes the form of an event-driven meeting; in many others, meetings are part of an ongoing process throughout a child's time in the system (or beyond).' Family teaming approaches include Family Group Decision Making/Family Group Conferences, Family Team Conferencing, the Permanency Teaming Process, and Team Decision Making.</p> <p>Source: National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (<a href="http://www.ncjfcj.org">http://www.ncjfcj.org</a>)</p>
<b>Mapping conference intervention</b>	<p>Mapping is a strengths-based approach used in child welfare practice that aims to reduce the number of cases being re-opened, advance understanding of cases opened four or more times, improve engagement with internal and external supports, and improve clinical service, all while ensuring child safety.</p> <p>The mapping conference is based upon the mapping process, a tool used in Signs Of Safety to focus the intervention on principles that facilitate positive engagement between child welfare personnel and family members. The map is typically used in a meeting with families during which questions are asked of family members to help the worker understand existing risk, past harm, family strengths, and existing safety. The questions it seeks to answer are: what are we worried about?; what is working well?; and what needs to happen?</p> <p>Source: Lwin et al., (2014)</p>
<b>Out-of-home care (OOHC)</b>	<p>Out-of-home care (OOHC) 'refers to a range of services which support children who are judged to be at risk from their natural parents because of maltreatment or because of their own behaviour. These can be home-based in a family, such as foster care or kinship care, or can be located in a professionally administered setting (e.g., staffed units, residential treatment centres, or children's homes). OOHC services take place on a continuum from initial placement to the maintenance of placement stability to the achievement of legal permanence (permanence consisting of restoration or reunification to the birth family, legal custody with a relative or other care provider, or adoption).'</p> <p>Source: Shlonsky et al., (2013)</p>
<b>Pacific Action Plan</b>	<p>The Pacific Action Plan, developed in consultation with Pacific communities, aims to "increase the wellbeing of all Pacific children, young people and their families. It aims to reduce the number of Pacific children and young people in care by helping them be well cared for in their own families" and supports families to access services.</p> <p>Source: Ministry of Social Development (2010) (<a href="http://www.cyf.govt.nz">www.cyf.govt.nz</a>)</p>
<b>Parent</b>	For the purpose of this review, we consider the term 'parent' to mean biological/birth parent or any other adult (such as a grandparent,



	aunt or uncle, or other family member) acting in the role of parent. In this report, this excludes foster carers or other out-of-home carers such as kinship carers appointed subsequent to child protection concerns being raised.
<b>Parenting</b>	Parenting is the process of raising children. It is the relationship between parents or caregivers and their children.
<b>Practice Framework</b>	For the purpose of this report, we considered a framework to be a model or set of ways to approach working that has been grouped together in policy or by government or organisations that has been or will be adopted or implemented by services or sectors.
<b>Practice Guidance</b>	Unlike frameworks as described above, we considered practice guidance documents those that have not been identified as a specific model that a particular service or sector will be adopting. Instead, practice guidance documents contain practice suggestions, information or tips.
<b>Restoration/Reunification</b>	<p>A restoration is when a child or young person returns to live in the care of a parent or parents for the long term. Care plans are prepared to support the restoration process, and must include a permanency plan. The plan should include a description of 'the minimum outcomes that must be achieved before it would be safe for the child or young person to return to his/her birth parents' and/or caregivers, details of the services FACS or other agencies are 'able to provide or arrange to facilitate restoration, and a statement of the length of time during which restoration should be actively pursued'.</p> <p>Source: NSW Family and Community Services (<a href="http://www.facs.nsw.gov.au">www.facs.nsw.gov.au</a>)</p>
<b>Risk of significant harm (ROSH)</b>	<p>Risk of significant harm (ROSH) is the threshold for statutory intervention in NSW. It can result from a single act or omission, or cumulative acts or omissions. Assessing ROSH involves determining if circumstances causing concern for the safety, welfare, or wellbeing of a child or young person are present to a significant extent. ROSH is assessed against the following broad categories: physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, psychological harm, danger to self or others, relinquished care, carer concern, unborn child. ROSH criteria specify when mandatory reporting responsibilities are activated.</p> <p>Source: NSW Family and Community Services (<a href="http://www.facs.nsw.gov.au">www.facs.nsw.gov.au</a>)</p>
<b>Scoping review</b>	<p>Scoping reviews aim to map rapidly the key concepts underpinning a research area and the main sources and types of evidence available, and can be undertaken as stand-alone projects in their own right, especially where an area is complex or has not been reviewed comprehensively before.</p> <p>Source: Arksey &amp; O'Malley (2003)</p>
<b>Signs of Safety</b>	Signs of Safety is a strengths-based, safety-focused approach to child protection casework originally developed in Australia and now used worldwide. The approach focuses on the question "How can the worker build partnerships with parents and children in situations of suspected or substantiated child abuse and still deal rigorously with the maltreatment issues?" At the core of the format is a risk assessment and case planning format that the practitioner can use to elicit, in common language, the professional's and family

	<p>members' views regarding concerns or dangers, existing strengths, safety and envisioned safety.</p> <p>Source: Signs of Safety (<a href="https://www.signsofsafety.net">https://www.signsofsafety.net</a>)</p>
<b>Solution-based casework</b>	<p>'Solution-based casework is a case management approach to assessment, case planning, and ongoing casework. The approach is designed to help the caseworker focus on the family in order to support the safety and wellbeing of their children. The goal is to work in partnership with the family to help identify their strengths, focus on everyday life events, and help them build the skills necessary to manage situations that are difficult for them. This approach targets specific everyday events in the life of a family that have caused the family difficulty and represent a situation in which at least one family member cannot reliably maintain the behaviour that the family needs to accomplish its goals.'</p> <p>Source: California Evidence Based Clearinghouse (<a href="http://www.cebc4cw.org">www.cebc4cw.org</a>)</p>
<b>Strengths-based</b>	<p>'Strengths-based practice is a collaborative process between the person supported by services and those supporting them, allowing them to work together to determine an outcome that draws on the person's strengths and assets. It concerns itself principally with the quality of the relationship that develops between those providing and those being supported, as well as the elements that the person seeking support brings to the process.'</p> <p>Source: Social Care Institute for Excellence (<a href="http://www.scie.org.uk">www.scie.org.uk</a>)</p>
<b>Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Client Access Strategies</b>	<p>'The Australian Government is seeking to make the Family Support Program services easier to access and more supportive for Australia's most vulnerable children and families. The Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Client Access Strategies (the Access Strategy) is intended to help providers identify the most vulnerable and disadvantaged families in their Activity Delivery Area(s) and how they can more effectively work with key stakeholders to offer more holistic service responses.'</p> <p>Source: Australian Government Department of Social Services (<a href="http://www.dss.gov.au">www.dss.gov.au</a>)</p>

# 1. Executive summary

## 1.1. Overview

This report describes a review undertaken to inform the NSW Department of Family and Community Services' (FACS) strategy to improve engagement with parents involved in the child protection system. The term "parents" refers to birth or biological parents or others acting in the primary caregiving role but excludes foster or kinship carers. When we mention "families", we are referring to birth families.

The objective of this review was to identify and synthesise strategies for engaging parents with workers in statutory child protection services and other agencies that work with families involved in the child protection system (the system). It refers to parent engagement with workers at any point during family involvement with the system including:

- initial contact
- intake
- assessment
- case planning
- intervention
- out-of-home care (OOHC)
- restoration, and
- post-restoration.

Engagement is an interactive process involving the establishment of effective, positive, collaborative relationships between parents and workers, with a shared understanding of goals and shared commitment to achieving goals. Engagement is important for helping parents complete programs and fulfil case plans, and for changing risky patterns of behaviour in parents.

## 1.2. Methods

A scoping review method was used to identify frameworks, policies, practice guides and literature reviews reporting strategies to engage birth parents, and families more broadly. Documents were sourced via a search of academic databases and organisation websites, and through requests made to colleagues. The documents were screened against a set of predetermined inclusion criteria. Identified strategies were collated and summarised thematically.

In order to maximise the set of engagement strategies identified in this review, we used a broad definition of the child protection system in our search which included both child protection workers, and personnel from other services that parents may be involved with. Child protection workers may find engagement strategies for these related services useful for their own practice, although they will need to use their own professional judgement as to their relevance and applicability. The scope of the review also included engagement between birth parents and foster carers, as foster

carers could be considered a component of the child protection system from the point of view of birth parents.

### 1.3. Findings

#### 1.3.1. Documents identified

The search identified 23 documents for inclusion in this review. These documents mainly were practice guidance documents, but there were also some frameworks and literature reviews. Documents were produced primarily for Australia ( $n = 12$ ) and the United States of America ( $n = 5$ ), with one each also for Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. The three literature reviews identified were international. Where a state was identified, the Australian documents were from NSW ( $n = 4$ ) and Victoria ( $n = 2$ ) and one each from Western Australia and Queensland.

Some documents reported at what point (or points) in the child protection continuum strategies were particularly relevant. Among those documents where this was reported, the points in the continuum that were identified were: initial contact ( $n = 1$ ); intake ( $n = 3$ ); assessment ( $n = 7$ ); case planning ( $n = 4$ ); intervention ( $n = 7$ ); OOHC ( $n = 10$ ); restoration ( $n = 4$ ); and post-restoration ( $n = 2$ ).<sup>1</sup>

#### 1.3.2. Engagement strategies

Strategies were organised into 14 interrelated categories as described briefly in box 1. The categories are presented in order, according to the number of discrete strategies identified for each (from most to least). Some of the strategies are worker-level and some agency-level approaches. The most commonly endorsed categories of strategies were: ensuring service culture supports engagement, using supportive and strengths-based behaviours, being flexible, resourcing agencies appropriately, creating a good first impression, and demonstrating respect.

Most of the strategies identified would generally be considered good practice when working with families in any context, such as: considering the whole family and all their concerns, showing respect and building on strengths, communicating clearly and without judgement, and collaborating effectively with other agencies. However, because of the circumstances of the families involved in child protection (e.g., histories of trauma, removal of children from the family) and because involvement in the child protection system is involuntary, these strategies are likely to be even more important, and parents may require a more concerted approach to engagement. This may involve the use of more strategies, longer-term engagement efforts, and an approach to engagement that underpins all work with families.

All categories of engagement strategies could apply at any stage of families' involvement with the child protection continuum. Within categories, some individual strategies would only be applicable at particular stages and for particular situations (such as those relating to parents with children in OOHC); selection of individual strategies would be a matter for agencies and for workers' professional judgement. For the most part, strategies were referred to in general terms rather than including specific details of agency type, staffing (referred to in this report by the generic term 'worker' to cover all personnel working with parents, not only case workers) or details of families. Several documents provided strategies for engaging fathers, but many of

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<sup>1</sup> Some documents reported more than one point at which a strategy was relevant.

those strategies would also be appropriate for any family member. Further unique strategies for specific groups of parents were identified as noted in section 1.3.3. There were few notable distinctions between strategies across countries or jurisdictions. The exception was that Australian and New Zealand documents had content on engaging different cultural groups, whereas this was not found in documents from other countries.

### 1.3.3. Engaging specific populations

Further to the strategies listed in box 1, the review identified strategies that apply to four specific populations: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander<sup>2</sup> families, culturally and linguistically diverse families; birth parents engaging with foster carers, and fathers who are perpetrators of domestic and family violence.

#### Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

Working with Aboriginal parents requires awareness of the cultural and historical factors that affect Aboriginal communities and an understanding of the unique role of family and kin. Some of the various strategies identified for engaging better with Aboriginal families include: engaging an Aboriginal worker; consulting with community and Aboriginal representatives; and developing an understanding of family and kin networks.

#### Engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families

The documents identified further strategies for engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families. These included: working with interpreters where needed; engaging an ethno-specific representative; and developing an understanding of cultural norms.

#### Engagement between birth parents and foster carers

Birth parents' engagement with foster carers may be enhanced if the carers make contact with birth parents before access visits, and if they accompany children on contact visits with birth parents. Taking steps to ensure the foster carers support and value the birth parents' role also helps to facilitate engagement.

#### Engaging perpetrators of domestic and family violence

One of the challenges when engaging a perpetrator of domestic and family violence is building rapport without excusing his<sup>3</sup> abusive behaviour. Some of the suggested ways to engage perpetrators are to: allow time for him to share his story and past experiences that may have shaped these behaviours, while not colluding; to focus on the needs to the child; and to convey a belief that he can change his behaviour.

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<sup>2</sup> Referred to as Aboriginal in remainder of review, as NSW is Aboriginal land.

<sup>3</sup> This review identified strategies for engaging fathers who are perpetrators of domestic and family violence. We acknowledge that, although less prevalent, women can also be perpetrators of domestic and family violence.

### Box 1. Strategies for engaging parents who are involved in the child protection system

**Ensure service culture supports engagement** - Parents may be better engaged when there is a clear agency-wide approach that all workers adhere to. It will be challenging for workers to attempt to engage parents in an agency that does not endorse engagement strategies.

**Use supportive and strengths-based behaviours** - Approach contact with parents from a supportive rather than a punitive perspective. Take the position that all parents have strengths, skills and resources and build plans around those.

**Be flexible** - Tailor and customise your approach to suit parents' individual needs. Be understanding of their other commitments and multiple, competing concerns.

**Resource agencies appropriately** - Agencies need appropriate funding in order to: broker services for families; provide an environment that is suitable for parents; have resources and provide programs for parents.

**Go where the parents are** - Particularly for non-mandated services that parents may need, workers could contact parents in places where they gather in the community, as well as in their homes.

**Demonstrate respect** - Respect can be shown in various ways such as by maintaining appointments, remembering concerns raised by parents, being honest, and showing empathy for their circumstances.

**Address parents' practical needs** - Support parents to address their various practical needs in addition to the concerns raised in a child protection report.

**Communicate clearly** - Open and honest communication will help engender trust and reduce anxiety parents may feel when engaging with child protection. Communicate in plain, clear language and adapt communication styles to suit individuals.

**Empower parents** - One of the key ways to empower parents is to involve and support them in choices, decisions and case planning. Building their strengths, skills and capacities will also facilitate empowerment.

**Create a good first impression** - The way a service responds when parents first come into contact with them can influence subsequent engagement. Ensuring a welcoming and supportive approach to that first point of contact is important.

**Maintain a non-judgemental stance** - Rather than judging parents for the problems they are experiencing, listen to their perspective and normalise their experiences. Reframe conversations so as to avoid blame.

**Provide sufficient time for engagement** - Allow time to build trusting, engaged relationships with parents, which may take longer due to their complex needs. Balance this with the need to support parents to start changing aspects of their parenting in a positive way.

**Streamline service provision** - Reduce the number of services and people parents need to engage with. A single caseworker can help to facilitate this process.

**Adopt culturally appropriate practices** - Agencies need to support parents in ways that are appropriate and respectful of culture (see section on engaging specific populations).

### 1.3.4. When strategies are not working

The review identified some additional measures to take when initial attempts to engage parents are not working. The review found that agencies should have policies and procedures in place for how to approach such circumstances. Some of the steps to take when engagement does not work could be to: re-evaluate existing engagement plans and ways of communicating with parents; identify what is and is not working; and focus and build on even the smallest signs of engagement.

### 1.3.5. Barriers to engagement

Several client level, worker level, service and contextual barriers to engagement were identified. Some of the key barriers appear to be parental mistrust of child protection services, negative or stereotyped perceived roles of parents, and complex personal circumstances. Strategies that emphasise support for parents in their roles, empathy for their circumstances, and understanding of the past experiences with services may help to reduce these barriers.

Several barriers apply to parents in general; however, some related specifically to fathers, Aboriginal families and culturally and linguistically diverse parents, particularly negative past experiences and lack of cultural appropriateness of services.

## 1.4. Factors to consider when implementing strategies in the New South Wales context

This scoping review has summarised a range of strategies that may help increase engagement of parents involved in the child protection system. A considerable amount of this content was written specifically related to Australian child protection systems, including NSW. This section describes factors to be considered when implementing these strategies in the NSW child protection context. See also box 2 for a list of these factors.

### Box 2. Factors to consider when implementing strategies

1. Building engagement requires leadership by decision-makers in the child protection system
2. Engagement requires a multi-strategy approach
3. Early engagement can build strong relationships
4. All family members need support to engage
5. The impact of the history of forced removal on engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
6. The values, beliefs and needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families
7. The diverse circumstances of parents with a child in care
8. Working with domestic and family violence requires additional support
9. Some engagement strategies may be new to parents and workers
10. Further research is required to understand engagement during the process of guardianship and open adoption
11. Effectiveness of engagement strategies is unknown
12. The engagement process is only one component of effective service provision



#### 1.4.1. Building engagement requires leadership by decision-makers in the child protection system

High level leadership for policies, practices and initiatives that are designed to enhance engagement with parents is required. This support could take the form of authorisation to practice in a particular way (e.g., taking more time to work with parents), providing required infrastructure (e.g., time and opportunities to work collaboratively with other agencies), and ensuring suitable training and support for staff.

#### 1.4.2. Engagement requires a multi-strategy approach

Many of the strategies identified here overlap, are related, or share similar qualities. Rather than implementing these as discrete, isolated practices it may be better to develop a model of practice that incorporates several engagement strategies and is used by all services who work with families involved in the child protection system.

#### 1.4.3. Early engagement can build strong relationships

Applying a model of practice that aims to foster engagement from the moment families become known to child protection services will help establish parents' understanding of their relationship with child protection and will also help to ensure the continued engagement of the parents with workers throughout the time they are involved with child protection.

#### 1.4.4. All family members need support to engage

Any engagement approach should be concerned with all family members, including mothers, fathers, children and other significant family members. Families involved in the child protection system have multiple and complex needs, and several family members are likely to present with issues or concerns. An approach to engaging parents should consider the needs of all family members.

#### 1.4.5. The impact of the history of forced removal on engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

In order to facilitate effective engagement with Aboriginal families, child protection services and workers need to have an understanding of the history of government sanctioned forced removal of Aboriginal children. Workers need to collaborate with Aboriginal community members to determine preferred ways of interacting, engaging and participating.

#### 1.4.6. The values, beliefs and needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families

An understanding of the history, customs and experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse communities is required when working with culturally and linguistically diverse families. It is important to note that different cultural groups will have different histories, customs and experiences, and that this diversity needs to be considered when interacting with culturally and linguistically diverse families. It is also important to note that even families *within* the same community will have different relationships to and experiences of that culture.



#### 1.4.7. The diverse circumstances of parents with a child in care

The nature of support provided to birth parents when children are in OOHC will depend upon the parents' capacity to change their behaviour with their children as may be required by court orders and when working towards restoration. Parents will be dealing with issues such as grief, loss and guilt as a result of having their children placed in care. Several strategies were identified specifically related to engagement with foster carers who may be a good resource for building and maintaining engagement during OOHC placements.

#### 1.4.8. Working with domestic and family violence requires additional support

There may be additional issues to consider when engaging with families where domestic and family violence has occurred. This review identified different approaches for engagement of fathers who are perpetrators of domestic and family violence.

#### 1.4.9. Some engagement strategies may be new to parents and workers

Those working toward engagement of parents need to acknowledge that some of these approaches may be unfamiliar to some parents. Aiming to support and engage parents, to build on their strengths and provide opportunities for decision making, may not match their concept of or previous experiences with child protection services. Some of the strategies identified here may also be unfamiliar to workers. Training and coaching in new practices and how to implement them with parents may be required to sustain change.

#### 1.4.10. Further research is required to understand engagement during the process of guardianship and open adoption

This review did not identify any strategies that specifically related to engagement of birth parents during the processes leading up to arrangements where the resolution is permanent residence in someone else's care, either through permanent guardianship or open adoption. A different approach may be required to support parents towards guardianship or relinquishment through adoption. Further research is needed to determine suitable strategies in these circumstances.

#### 1.4.11. Effectiveness of engagement strategies is unknown

The purpose of this review was to describe engagement strategies from frameworks, policies and practices guides, including ones that may have been evaluated. The review authors did not seek to assess the effectiveness of these strategies for improving engagement. Further work would be required to determine which of these strategies or which combination of strategies works best and for whom.

#### 1.4.12. The engagement process is only one component of effective service provision

The strategies described in this review may help parents to take up, remain in, or complete programs; however, to result in improved outcomes for children and parents, consideration must be paid to the evidence for the broader services and practices offered to parents. Engagement in programs that are not suitable or effective will not benefit parents or children.

## 1.5. Limitations

This scoping review included only English language documents that were available online. Books, theses, chapters, and conference papers were excluded. Authors and publishing organisations were not contacted for further information.

The scope of this work covered frameworks, policies, practice guidance documents or reviews. Additional information about parent engagement may be available in the literature not covered here.

## 1.6. Conclusions

This scoping review identified several reasons why engagement with parents involved in child protection may be challenging, including parental mistrust of child protection services, negative or stereotyped perceived roles of parents, and complex personal circumstances. The review also identified strategies to increase engagement such as: ensuring service culture supports engagement, using strengths-based behaviours, being flexible, resourcing agencies appropriately, creating a good first impression, and demonstrating respect.

The central message of these strategies is to apply the principles of good practice, but with additional efforts or allowances for the multiple and complex needs of the families. Efforts to engage parents may work best when senior leaders and service systems more broadly provide an authorising environment for engagement, when a multi-strategy approach is used, and when engagement efforts are early and on-going. Additional consideration should be paid to the cultural needs of families, to engagement of parents with children in care including engagement with foster carers, and when working with perpetrators of violence.

Implementing an engagement model consisting of strategies identified here may encourage parents to join and stay involved in services and successfully complete programs. Coupled with evidence-based interventions, this may result in improved circumstances for children and families.

## 2. Introduction

### 2.1. Overview

This report describes a scoping review conducted to inform a strategy of the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) to improve ways of engaging, working with, and supporting parents throughout their involvement with the child protection system.

In this review, “parents” means biological/birth parents or any other adult (such as a grandparent, aunt or uncle, or other family member) acting in the role of birth parents. It excludes foster carers or other out-of-home carers such as kinship carers appointed subsequent to child protection concerns being raised. When we mention “families” in this review, we are referring to birth families.

By engagement we mean parents and workers working together; with respect, care, transparency and collaboration characterising the working relationship (Bromfield, Sutherland & Parker, 2012). Engagement is ‘fundamental to working effectively in child wellbeing and child protection’ (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d).

Engagement, for the purposes of this review, may be directly with child protection services or with other agencies and workers that serve families who are involved in the child protection system. The engagement of parents with the child protection system is a fundamental factor underlying progress in achieving outcomes, and may be particularly important but also hardest to attain when families are involuntary participants (QLD Department of Communities Child Safety and Disability Services, 2013).

### 2.2. Background

#### 2.2.1. Child protection

Child protection refers to ‘preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse against children’ (UNICEF, 2006). Child protection services, often referred to as child welfare or children’s services, provide a range of services from prevention to intervention and treatment. These services aim to protect children and strengthen families so that they are able to care for their children, and they should be family-centred, strengths-based, and respectful of the family’s culture, values, beliefs, and needs (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

In Australia, the legalistic approach to child protection prominent in the 1990s meant that child protection systems became the main point of contact between government departments and vulnerable families, increasing demand on those services. At the same time, support for vulnerable families from other services was reduced. Since then, new models of child protection and family support have been adopted in some jurisdictions which recognise the importance of supporting families in preventing child abuse and neglect (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015).

Family involvement with the child protection system falls along a continuum, from first contact with the system, through processes of intake, assessment and case planning, then intervention and family preservation. Child protection services are also responsible for providing temporary and permanent out-of-home care (OOHC)

for children when families are unable to care for their children. Ideally, children are restored to their family once the family is able to care for them again. Once families are restored, a period of stabilisation follows. Some families come in and out of the system repeatedly due to ongoing or recurring concerns.

There are various reasons why children, parents and families may become known to or involved in the child protection system. Most notably these include child abuse or neglect, but also other factors that may place the child at risk of harm, including domestic and family violence, parental substance misuse and parental mental health issues.

### 2.2.2. Child protection in New South Wales

Legislation guiding child protection and the principles underlying legislation vary considerably by jurisdiction. NSW falls under the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998. This is meant to be ‘administered under the principle that, in any action or decision concerning a particular child or young person, the safety, welfare and well-being of the child or young person are paramount.’ The objectives of the Act are to ensure the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people, to ensure the capacity of people caring for children, to ensure that child facilities provide safe and nurturing environments, and to ensure that assistance is provided to persons responsible for caring for children or young people. The core focus of the Act is to ensure the safety of children.

In November 2015, the NSW Government commissioned Mr. David Tune AO PSM to conduct an independent review (*Their Futures Matter*) of the OOH system in NSW (NSW Government Family and Community Services, 2016). The review was commissioned in response to the growth of the OOH population and continuing poor outcomes for the most vulnerable children and families. The independent review concluded that despite significantly increased government expenditure, the number of children and young people in OOH has doubled over the past 10 years, and continues to increase. Moreover, the system is failing to improve long-term outcomes for children and to arrest the devastating cycles of intergenerational abuse and neglect. Outcomes are particularly poor for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander<sup>4</sup> children, young people and families.

The review recommended a vision for systemic reform to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families by ensuring:

- children and young people are safe and supported to reach their potential;
- vulnerable families receive help specific to their needs, to improve their life outcomes and keep their children safe; and
- Aboriginal children and families have access to effective, culturally appropriate services to achieve better outcomes.

The review notes that ensuring access, engagement and educational attainment for children and young people is an important lever to improved outcomes for children and families (NSW Government Family and Community Services, 2016).

According to Family and Community Services (2013), the purpose of child protection in NSW is to ‘ensure children and young people at risk of significant harm (ROSH)

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<sup>4</sup> Referred to as Aboriginal in remainder of report as NSW is Aboriginal land

are safe and those children that do need to be in OOHC are on a pathway to having a home for life...’, (p. 1). Promoting good parenting and, where possible, keeping families together are key objectives of child protection (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, 2013). Working effectively with and supporting birth parents is therefore essential. If child protection services are seen as focusing on the child to the exclusion of working with and supporting families, it is understandable that many families may be reluctant to engage with services. In order to work successfully with parents, the child protection system needs to ensure parents are engaged with child protection workers and other personnel, and with OOHC carers. Parents also need to engage during assessment processes in order for services to gain an accurate assessment of family risks and strengths, and during case planning so that they can actively participate in making decisions that concern their family. Engagement during any services or programs parents participate in is also crucial for them to benefit from their participation.

### 2.2.3. Parent engagement

The US Department of Health and Human Services (n.d.) notes that family engagement varies across disciplines such as education, child welfare and juvenile justice. In the NSW child protection context, engagement is a process of ‘establishing effective working relationships so that there can be a shared understanding of goals and a shared commitment to supporting the child or young person’ (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.). The aim of engagement is to:

- create a positive and effective working relationship between the worker and family to ensure the best interests of children
- ensure families understand what is happening and provide feedback to workers, in circumstances that can often be challenging and distressing
- ensure families are provided with opportunities to develop their capacity to address issues which might affect their ability to care for and protect their children
- enhance social inclusion of families (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, 2012).

Parent engagement is the foundation of good practice in the child protection system because it promotes the safety, permanency, and wellbeing of children and families (Steib, 2004). Vulnerable families are at high risk of refusing and dropping out of services, which has prompted an increased emphasis on engagement in child protection (Flannery, Watson, & Tully, 2008). Timely completion of programs is often part of family case plans, therefore non- or delayed completion of programs and plans places children at increased risk of removal or means that there is no possibility of restoration with their families (Dawson & Berry, 2002). Cheng and Lo (2016) found that collaborative engagement between parents and child protection workers promotes family progress through case plans. The success of interventions is therefore predicated on collaboration with and engagement of families (Dawson & Berry, 2002).

Child protection workers and service systems can employ active strategies to engage parents that increase enrolment, reduce drop-out rates and increase intervention completion rates and success (Watson, 2005). The purpose of these strategies is to reduce:

- high rates of refusal to participate in services seen in vulnerable families
- high rates of attrition from services of vulnerable families
- barriers vulnerable families face in accessing services (Watson, 2005).

### 2.3. Objective

The objective of this project was to identify and synthesise strategies for engaging parents, or families more broadly, throughout their involvement in the child protection system. To achieve this, we conducted a scoping review. A scoping review uses systematic methods to map out areas of study that are not well understood or are under-researched (Arksey & O'Malley, 2003).

### 2.4. Research questions

This review aimed to address the following questions regarding engagement of birth parents:

1. What strategies have been used or recommended for the engagement of birth parents?
  - a. What strategies have been identified within different jurisdictions in Australia?
  - b. What strategies have been identified internationally?
  - c. Do strategies differ based on point of contact in the continuum of involvement? (e.g. placement prevention, children are in care, restoration)
  - d. Do strategies differ based on service or personnel type? (e.g. child protection services, police department, specialist domestic and family violence services, child protection worker, social worker)
  - e. Do strategies differ based on the circumstances of the child, parents or family? (i.e. their presenting problems or reason for involvement).
  - f. What strategies are commonly identified?
2. What are the barriers to engagement of birth parents?
3. What are the implications of these findings for policy and practice in NSW?

### 3. Methodology

Using a scoping review methodology, we identified international, English-language published and unpublished frameworks, policies, practice guides and literature reviews of strategies to engage birth parents who are involved in the child protection system. The definition of 'child protection system' was interpreted broadly in our search and incorporated both child protection workers and workers from other services who work with parents involved in the child protection system. This broad definition was used in order to maximise the set of engagement strategies identified in this review. Child protection workers may find engagement strategies for these related services useful for their own practice, although they will need to use their own professional judgement as to their relevance and applicability. In this review we have referred to all staff working with parents involved in the child protection system as 'workers'. The scope of the review also included engagement between birth parents and foster carers as foster carers could be considered a component of child protection from the point of view of birth parents.

Documents were sourced via a search of three academic databases, 23 organisation websites and through requests made to colleagues and FACS. Documents were screened against a set of predetermined inclusion criteria. These criteria required that documents were practice frameworks and guides, policy comparisons and analyses, or legislative frameworks with a central focus on family engagement with services or systems. No restrictions were placed on study design or date of publication and only online, English language documents were included (more details in section A.1.5). Identified strategies were collated and summarised thematically. Refer to Appendices A and B for full details of the review search processes and document selection.



## 4. Results

### 4.1. Documents identified

We identified 23 eligible documents from bibliographic databases, website searches, and expert recommendations. Full details of documents identified through our review process is given in Appendix B. There was some overlap between the three document sources and duplicates have been removed from our final count of included documents. Table 1 summarises the 23 documents, including purpose, jurisdiction (country, or country plus state/territory for Australian documents), and point of contact during involvement in the child protection continuum.

The documents we identified were primarily from Australia ( $n = 12$ ) and the United States of America ( $n = 5$ ), with one each also for Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. The three literature reviews identified were international. Where state/territory was identified in Australian documents, they were from NSW ( $n = 4$ ) and Victoria ( $n = 2$ ) and one each from Western Australia and Queensland.

Some documents reported the point in child protection continuum at which strategies were particularly relevant. At times, multiple points in time were reported within the one document. These points in time were: initial contact ( $n = 1$ ); intake ( $n = 3$ ); assessment ( $n = 7$ ); case planning ( $n = 4$ ); intervention ( $n = 7$ ); OOHC ( $n = 10$ ); restoration ( $n = 4$ ); and post-restoration ( $n = 2$ ). Where no time point was specified, the strategy is deemed to be useful for any stage of practice, subject to the professional judgement of the worker.

All references in this section are to documents identified in our search process unless otherwise specified. Many of the documents we identified specifically addressed ways of engaging fathers with the child protection system. Where strategies are particularly aimed at engaging fathers, we have noted this in the text; however, many strategies so identified could be effective for working with any parent.

Using a single source identified in our search and chosen for its rigour, breadth, and generalisability (Watson 2005, a literature review), we created an initial list of categories by which we could code the strategies described in all included sources. This initial categorisation was refined using two additional documents identified in our search; a local engagement framework (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.) and an international engagement framework (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). We then used the revised list of interrelated categories to code all strategies identified in all documents. This categorisation was used to underpin the narrative synthesis provided in the results section. The amount of text under each category is not a reflection for the extent of evidence for or importance of a strategy; rather, it simply means that authors discussed that particular strategy in more detail.



**Table 1. Documents included in the scoping review**

Reference	Purpose	Jurisdiction	Point of contact
Bromfield, Sutherland and Parker (2012)	Specialist practice resource based on the Best Interests case practice model, intended to provide additional guidance for practitioners with cases where families have multiple and complex needs.	Australia (VIC)	Intake  Assessment
Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016)	Practice resource for professionals that provides an overview of the foundational elements of family engagement, as well as strategies and promising practices for implementing the approach at a case level, peer level and systems level.	US	Assessment  Case planning  Intervention  OOHC  Restoration
Corwin (2012)	Summarises barriers to and proactive strategies for engaging birth parents in child welfare services, developing connections between birth and foster parents, utilising birth parents as agency partners to mentor and train other birth parents, and drawing upon birth parent experience to advise at the organisational level.	US	Case planning  OOHC  Restoration  Post-restoration
Department for Child Protection (2013)	Resource for child protection practitioners to develop safe and meaningful working relationships with men perpetrating family and domestic violence, while ensuring the safety of child and adult victims.	Australia (WA)	Not specified

Department of Communities Child Safety and Disability Services (2013)	Practice paper that draws on research findings regarding engagement with families who are involuntarily involved in child protection. Implications for practice are also presented.	Australia (QLD)	Not specified
Gerring, Kemp and Marcenko (2008)	A practical framework for relational practice with birth families organised around parental visitation. The paper describes details of everyday practice undertaken by workers in the Connections Project, which sought to 'engage and enhance birth family participation in case planning and services; to repair, maintain, and build parent-child relationships; and to support a range of connections between birth and foster parents.'	US	Case planning  OOHC  Restoration
Gordon, Oliveros, Hawes, Iwamoto and Rayford (2012)	Systematic review synthesises the available literature regarding factors and strategies that may support father involvement in the child protection system and services.	International	Assessment  Intervention  OOHC
Iannos and Antcliff (2013)	Practice resource for practitioners working with families in home-based intensive services. It draws on Signs of Safety framework and on evidence-based practice for work with families at risk of child maltreatment.	Australia	Not specified
Lwin, Versanov, Cheung, Goodman and Andrews (2014)	Reports on a mixed methods evaluation of the "mapping conference" intervention <sup>5</sup> . Qualitative results from focus groups with child welfare investigative workers and supervisors regarding cases that included a mapping conference are reported.	Canada	OOHC

<sup>5</sup> A mapping conference is a formal meeting with families during which questions are asked of family members and their network, to help the worker understand existing risk, past harm, family strengths, and existing safety (Lwin et al., 2014). Also see glossary.

Malm, Murray and Geen (2006)	Research report examining current practice in child welfare agencies for identifying, locating, and involving non-resident fathers in case decision making and permanency planning. As well as identifying the extent to which such fathers are involved, it investigated barriers and facilitators to involvement.	US	OOHC
Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherston, Holland and Tolman (2012)	Reviews the published research from 2000 to 2010 about the barriers to and facilitators of father engagement.	International	Assessment  Intervention
McDonald (2010)	Practice sheet summaries which build on the findings from the Engaging Hard to Reach Families and Children study and provides ideas for practitioners and policymakers about how to increase engagement of disadvantaged (or “hard to reach”) families in child and family services and programs.	Australia	Not specified
Miller (2007)	Explores the theoretical underpinnings and practice ramifications of the Victorian Best Interests principles, and outlines benefits for children and families. It is Intended to promote discussion in the child protection, placement, and family service sectors.	Australia (VIC)	Assessment  Intervention  OOHC  Restoration  Post-restoration
Ministry of Social Development (2010)	The Pacific Action Plan, aimed at staff, stakeholders, and people the Ministry and Social Development works with, focuses on improving permanency outcomes for Pacific Islander children and young people in care. The plan was developed following six months of consultation with Pacific communities.	New Zealand	OOHC

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2016)	Practice tips for engaging fathers with a history of perpetrating domestic and family violence. Reports on lessons learnt from Caring Dads: Safer Children program that aims to help improve the parenting behaviour of fathers who have exposed their children to domestic and family violence.	UK	Intervention
NSW Department of Community Services (2009)	Practice resource that provides practical tips for engaging with fathers. It aims to support father-inclusive casework practice with vulnerable families.	Australia (NSW)	Intervention
NSW Department of Family and Community Services (n.d.)	Website that provides an overview of: what is engagement?; the principles of engagement; and when engagement is difficult or not working. These are part of the Child Wellbeing and Child Protection – NSW Interagency Guidelines that provide information and guidance to all agencies involved in the delivery of child wellbeing and child protection services in NSW.	Australia (NSW)	Assessment  Case planning  Intervention  OOHC
NSW Department of Family and Community Services (2008)	Practice guidance that acknowledges that engagement of Aboriginal families may be particularly difficult for non-Aboriginal workers and presents some information workers need to know about when working with Aboriginal families (cultural, historical context) and some suggestions for working with Aboriginal families.	Australia (NSW)	Not specified
NSW Department of Family and Community Services (2010)	Practice resource with strategies for working with culturally and linguistically diverse families in the child protection system.	Australia (NSW)	Not specified
Robinson, Scott, Meredith, Nair and Higgins (2012)	An overview of an analysis of Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Client Access Strategies documents that provides insight into the strategies by which Family Support Program services reach, engage, and maintain engagement with vulnerable and disadvantaged families and children.	Australia	Initial contact  Intake

			Assessment
Tehan and McDonald (2010)	Practice sheet that provides ideas for practitioners and policy-makers about how to increase engagement of fathers in child and family services and programs.	Australia	Intervention
The Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group (2011)	Practice resources describing barriers to family engagement in child protection, and how to achieve and evaluate engagement.	US	Not specified
Watson (2005)	Discussion paper that identifies effective strategies that promote engagement by families in services and examines the strength of the evidence base underpinning these strategies. It is based on a review of peer-reviewed literature, practice guides, literature on hard to reach people, and engagement of families in data collection.	International	Intake  Intervention

## 4.2. Strategies for engaging parents

The strategies we identified for improving engagement with parents have been organised according to the 14 interrelated categories outlined in box 3. Each category represents a common theme shared by multiple strategies.

Categories are ordered according to how many strategies within that category were identified, beginning with the largest category: 'ensure service culture supports engagement'. This ordering of the categories should not be interpreted as an indication of the strength of evidence for any particular category, but as an indication of which kinds of strategies were most commonly identified in the documents we reviewed.

These categories are based on documents that primarily pertain to Australia, with a few relating to other countries. Although few differences were apparent between countries or jurisdictions, it is possible that there may be some strategies which are less suited to certain jurisdictions, sectors and agencies.

In the following section, the individual strategies within each category are summarised. Where information was available in source documents, we indicate whether the strategy is intended for use at a particular point of contact (e.g., intake, assessment etc.), for children living in OOHHC, and for fathers. The full list of strategies, presented by category, is given in Appendix C.

### Box 3. Categories of engagement strategies.

1. Ensure service culture supports engagement
2. Use supportive and strengths-based behaviours
3. Be flexible
4. Resource agencies appropriately
5. Go where the parents are
6. Demonstrate respect
7. Address parents' practical needs
8. Communicate clearly
9. Empower parents
10. Create a good first impression
11. Maintain a non-judgemental stance
12. Provide sufficient time for engagement
13. Streamline service provision
14. Adopt culturally appropriate practices (see engagement of specific populations)

All categories of engagement strategies could apply at any stage of families' involvement with the child protection continuum. Within categories, some individual strategies would only be applicable at particular stages and for particular situations (such as those relating to parents with children in OOHHC); selection of individual strategies would be a matter for agencies and for workers' professional judgement. For the most part, strategies were referred to in general terms rather than including

specific details of agency type, staffing, or details of families. We did, however, identify strategies for engaging clients from four particular population groups:

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
2. Culturally and linguistically diverse families
3. Birth parents engaging with foster carers
4. Clients who are perpetrators of domestic and family violence.

We also identified some steps to take when engagement strategies are not working. The strategies for engaging parents are described first, and we then describe the strategies for particular population groups.

#### 4.2.1. Ensure service culture supports engagement

While many of the engagement strategies we identified are best suited for implementation by individual workers in direct contact with parents, it is important that the overall culture of the service or agency supports engagement. For example, a service culture that encourages a continuous relationship with the family improves parent engagement (Iannos & Antcliff, 2013). An engagement-oriented service culture will also ensure a coordinated transition takes place if new workers are assigned to families (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.).

A service culture which encourages a holistic understanding of parents' circumstances enhances engagement. It is recommended that workers acknowledge all of the stressors impacting on a family, and have a good working knowledge of parents' defensive patterns and developmental needs (Gerring, Kemp & Marcenko, 2008). The same authors suggest that a sound understanding of relationships and parent-child bonding will also aid engagement. It may also be useful for organisations to have an understanding of trauma theory, for example the ongoing impact of trauma on mental health and on future experiences (Miller, 2007).

It can be useful for services to reflect on the barriers to engagement that the parents may have experienced previously (Bromfield et al., 2012). Some services match workers to families in order to increase identification with the worker and help overcome such barriers (Watson, 2005).

Agency-wide strategies which enhance ongoing engagement with parents include:

- maintaining good interagency relationships (for example by being clear about roles),
- promoting collaboration between organisations,
- maintaining good records,
- promoting ongoing discussions, and
- being clear about which issues are negotiable and which non-negotiable (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.).

Within the community, it is suggested that agencies promote and deliver their services in a non-stigmatising way and develop relationships with other agencies (McDonald, 2010). Agencies should ensure cultural competency for specific populations both among caseworkers and across the organisation, but at the same time recognise the parents as experts on their own unique situation (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

Some other strategies that services and agencies could consider as means of promoting engagement are:

- Including parents formerly involved with child protection services in activities such as:
  - boards and committees
  - evaluating services and programs
  - employment as practice advisors and trainers, and
  - advocates for change (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).
- Creating father-friendly service environments (for example displaying images and handouts that convey positive images of men interacting with children) (Maxwell et al., 2012; NSW Department of Family and Community Services, 2009) and maintaining a positive attitude towards men (Maxwell et al., 2012).
- Some authors suggested that there should be male staff or volunteers ‘front of house’ and that male facilitators may be more appropriate than female in some circumstances (Maxwell et al., 2012; Tehan & McDonald, 2010). Another author noted that female workers can also build strong relationships with fathers—it is the recognition of the father’s positive role that makes the difference rather than gender of workers (NSW Department of Community Services, 2009). However, it should be noted that all staff, male or female, should have a commitment to including fathers while not marginalising female clients (Tehan & McDonald, 2010).
- Encouraging workers to reflect on their interactions with fathers (NSW Department of Community Services, 2009), providing staff development on working with fathers and father-specific practices (Gordon et al., 2012; Tehan & McDonald, 2010), and addressing workers’ concerns regarding non-resident fathers (Malm, Murray & Green, 2012).
- Improving information exchange and collaboration across agencies (raised in relation to fathers but applicable to all) (Gordon et al., 2012).

#### 4.2.2. Use supportive and strengths-based behaviours

Supporting parents and the family as a whole helps child protection workers build a partnership and engage with parents (Lwin et al., 2014; NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.). This involves getting to know and establishing a relationship with the family and developing an understanding of its strengths and needs, and developing case plans accordingly (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.).

Parental engagement can be increased through attempts to foster a trusting and supportive relationship. Watson (2005) found that mothers were more likely to continue with a program if they were visited when pregnant, rather than after their baby is born. This helped to form a trusting, supportive relationship with the worker. Using verbal encouragement, and avoiding authoritarian language which can create distance and seem threatening, also helps to build a supportive, engaged relationship (Watson, 2005).

Where a child is in OOHC, workers can be a consistent, committed presence in parent contact visits with children by supporting the parent and helping parents and



children relive happier times in earlier visits. Workers can also help parents and children develop rituals for ending visitation sessions which will help minimise parents' sense of loss, help them endure any necessary separation, and provide reassurance about future visits (Gerring et al., 2008). Trust can also be fostered by using non-stigmatising branding for agencies by, for example, calling a service Child Support Services rather than using terms associated with child protection (Watson, 2005). This will help to convey a sense of support rather than intervention (Watson, 2005).

Another supportive approach to working with parents is to focus on family *strengths*. Strengths-based approaches support families by starting from an assumption that all people, including those having difficulties, have resources and skills which they can draw upon in order to make positive change (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.). Strengths-based approaches view families as more than just their problems, identifying what a parent is doing well and what personal resources they have (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.).

Strengths-based approaches help parents engage with change processes (Miller, 2007). For example, if workers can help identify a time when a parent was able to appropriately care for their child, it may help the parent to draw on the skills used during this successful time in future interactions with their child, thereby helping to change their parenting behaviour. A key aim of strengths-based approaches is to identify parents' strengths and build on them (Gerring et al., 2008; Gordon et al., 2012; Iannos & Antcliff 2013).

In practice, strengths-based approaches (sometimes also referred to as client-centred practices (Robinson et al., 2012)) are characterised by an active, caring, whole-of-family attitude to the situation (Iannos & Antcliff 2013; Bromfield et al., 2012) which is driven by the needs of families (Robinson et al., 2012). While not ignoring the reasons why the agency became involved with the family, agencies using a strengths-based approach look at the 'whole picture' for the family, including their skills and resources, in addition to the problems they are facing (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.).

When working from a strengths-based perspective, allow parents to tell their stories without interruption (Gerring et al., 2008) before exploring and addressing things that may affect their ability to care for their family (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.). For example, commence by identifying what parents are doing well (including asking them what they think they are doing well) and what resources they have available (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.). Next, set realistic and achievable goals which are mutually agreed upon, allowing family members choice (where possible) (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Gerring et al., 2008; NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.). Finally, acknowledge and validate parents' feelings, use positive language and celebrate progress and successes with families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Gerring et al., 2008; NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.).

Supportive, strengths-based approaches have been identified as being particularly useful for engaging fathers (Tehan & McDonald, 2010). A strengths-based approach with fathers might involve, for example, telling fathers about the contribution they make to their families and avoiding the 'expert' role (Tehan & McDonald, 2010).

Workers can focus on and reinforce the connection between father and child, and work with mothers to support fathers' involvement. Improving engagement with fathers also involves workers remembering to:

- address questions about the child to the father as well as to the mother (NSW Department of Community Services, 2009), and
- recognise and take into account the diversity of fathers':
  - attitudes to parenting, parenting skills and abilities, and
  - cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (NSW Department of Community Services, 2009).

Social norms regarding the role of fathers may inhibit some fathers' capacity to nurture their children. It may help engagement if workers show an understanding of fathers' behaviour in the context of adherence to traditional masculine norms and help them to develop ways to be emotionally available to their children while maintaining a sense of manhood. This is especially true for fathers who are from minority backgrounds, and others who feel disenfranchised from and distrustful of the system (Gordon et al., 2012).

Other engagement strategies described in the source documents also fit the strengths-based approach. For example, family group decision making (FGDM), a particular model of family group conferencing, is a strengths-based process which emphasises family member preferences and involves extended family and a range of community services when developing case plans and making decisions (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). The Signs of Safety framework is a protocol-based approach to risk assessment and case planning which uses strengths-based processes to promote engagement (Corwin, 2012).

The literature suggested some indicators that a strengths-based approach may be working well to engage parents (WA Department for Child Protection and Family Support, 2013), such as:

- open communication, with information being exchanged between parents and workers, rather than instructions passing from workers to parents.
- reliable attendance at appointments by workers and family members
- generation of ideas on ways to address issues and helpful programs and activities from both workers and parents
- receptive listening, with parents considering suggestions from staff and making their own
- the family taking responsibility for following up on agreed actions
- the family keeping the worker updated on their progress and advising on changes in circumstances.

#### 4.2.3. Be flexible

Being flexible helps parents engage with services by increasing opportunities for interaction. Flexibility can be demonstrated in many areas of worker and agency practice.

An important opportunity for flexibility relates to service entry and access. For example, flexibility can be demonstrated by reducing eligibility criteria if parents are having trouble accessing services and having multiple referral pathways and gateways into a service (Watson, 2005). Consider family members' other obligations when planning meetings, and schedule accordingly (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Schedule visits on weekends or evenings if necessary (Watson, 2005). If parents can't keep appointments, be understanding, but be persistent to ensure that interviews and visits take place (Gerring et al., 2008). Multiple contact points for families, such as extended family members, might be needed if the family's contact details change (Watson, 2005).

Once parents are in contact with services, start where the family is. For example, if parents are worried about the next meal, caseworkers should not start by addressing alternative ways of responding to problematic child behaviour simply because covering responses to child behaviour was planned for that day (Watson, 2005). It might also be necessary to collaborate with other agencies to arrange support for parents. This should ideally occur during assessment and planning stages, but other agencies should be able to be called in at any stage (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.).

Flexibility was frequently cited as a strategy for engaging fathers, with several tips identified below for how to be flexible with fathers. Many of these strategies could also apply to other family members. Suggestions for being flexible with fathers included:

- build discussions around an activity and provide hands-on learning opportunities (Maxwell et al., 2012; NSW Department of Community Services, 2009; Tehan & McDonald, 2010)
- reduce discomfort by having worker interacting side-by-side with father rather than face-to-face (Tehan & McDonald, 2010)
- offer flexible service hours (Maxwell et al., 2012; NSW Department of Community Services, 2009; Tehan & McDonald, 2010)
- consult fathers as to what services they require (Maxwell et al., 2012)
- take diverse attitudes to parenting and diverse family structures into account (NSW Department of Community Services, 2009)
- provide ongoing assessment and adjustment (Gordon et al., 2012)
- focus on the couple relationship even in couples who are not cohabiting; that is, consider their relationship even though one member of the couple may not be living in the home with the child (Gordon et al., 2012)
- have male staff or male volunteers (Tehan & McDonald, 2010)
- hold child and family activities in 'male friendly' spaces (e.g. sporting clubs, workplaces) (Maxwell et al., 2012; Tehan & McDonald, 2010).

Inclusive practice principles ensure flexibility for the birth family when children are in OOHC. Parents may particularly benefit from having visits with their children in homelike settings, workers preparing parents and children for visits, workers tailoring visits to child and family needs, and having supportive involvement from foster carers (Gerring et al., 2008).

#### 4.2.4. Resource agencies appropriately

To engage parents, agencies need appropriate resources. These can range from finances and procedures to support timely emergency monetary support, to long-term-staff support and development and interagency collaboration plans.

Resources which help support parent engagement in the early stages of involvement include brokerage funds that are easily available for staff to respond to families' immediate practical needs (Watson, 2005), toll-free contact numbers (Watson, 2005) and the use of internet, social media, Skype, telephone conferencing, and smartphones to engage parents (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Robinson et al., 2012). Agencies should be resourced to allow families access to services with the least paperwork possible (McDonald, 2010).

Agencies can present a welcoming physical environment for meetings, with space, accessibility, and representation of the child via alternative means (photos, artwork) if the child cannot be physically present (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016) and can set up play areas for children and have staff play with them, allowing parents to learn by example (McDonald, 2010).

During the family's involvement with an agency, it is helpful if there can be stable allocation of the same caseworker to a family (Watson, 2005), and frequent and substantive caseworker visits (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Contact between parents and caseworkers weekly or more often may be necessary, though this can be stepped back as work progresses (Watson, 2005).

Other engagement strategies requiring agency resources are:

- using peer mentors (parents who were once involved with the child protection system) to help parents meet case plan goals and navigate the system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016)
- providing parents with opportunities to socialise with other parents (McDonald, 2010).

If children are in OOHC, engagement may be improved if workers make visits between children and parents lively and fun, with space and expectation for games and activities, and with birth parents encouraged not to raise issues and concerns until after the session (Gerring et al., 2008).

Agency-wide resources which can help with parent engagement are: training staff in culturally appropriate practice and programs; ensuring adequate staff for development and supervision (Robinson et al., 2012; Watson, 2005); and developing joint protocols for working with other agencies (Watson, 2005). Strategies for engaging with Aboriginal families, and with culturally and linguistically diverse parents, are outlined in more detail in sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2 below.

Additional resourcing considerations which have been suggested for improving engagement with fathers include:

- making specific efforts to contact and engage fathers. For example, offer them the same services and supports that mothers receive but also address father-specific needs, and ensure a constructive father-caseworker relationship (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

- including the term ‘father’ as well as ‘mother’ or ‘parent’ in all forms, assessments, guidelines, checklists, handouts, and promotional materials (NSW Department of Community Services, 2009) and display positive images of fathers (Maxwell et al., 2012; Tehan & McDonald, 2010). However, use caution, as some fathers may be more self-conscious about attending a service labelled as being for fathers.
- using mediation rather than litigation to resolve custody disputes (Gordon et al., 2012)
- providing guidance and training for caseworkers on identifying and involving non-resident fathers (Malm et al., 2012)
- developing an assessment system that is common or linked across the service system (Gordon et al., 2012)
- providing workers with training in working with fathers (Gordon et al., 2012) and a staff manager dedicated to engaging with men (Tehan & McDonald, 2010)
- providing programs specifically for men (Gordon et al., 2012).

#### 4.2.5. Go where the parents are

##### *Intake*

Parents involved in the child protection system will typically have to participate in various services or programs within the community in order to meet their needs and support completion of their case plans. This will often include services that parents are mandated to participate in as part of their court orders, but may include other, optional, services designed to support the family during their contact with child protection.

To increase ongoing engagement with such services, workers can reach out into the community both before/at intake, and during clients’ involvement. As with many other strategies, parents may be more likely to attend non-mandated services if the services are already well known in the community. Services and workers may need to work out where parents gather (e.g. shops, parks, sporting venues, other government services) and go to them (McDonald, 2010; Robinson et al., 2012), or ensure their services are accessible (Watson, 2005).

Assertive outreach via home visits, and accompanying a known worker on initial visits, can assist engagement (Watson, 2005), as can recruiting parents through agencies that are not seen as representing authority (such as needle exchanges, food charities, general health services) and letting those agencies act as ambassadors (Watson, 2005). Outreach visits that start during pregnancy rather than after the child is born are more likely to be seen as forming a trusting relationship and supporting the mother (Watson, 2005). An alliance is developed which involves helping the mother prepare to care for her child instead of a response that could be viewed as ‘protecting the baby from an unskilled mother’ (Watson, 2005, p. 6).

Young fathers may feel excluded during the birth of their children. They can be engaged in hospital at the time of their child’s birth if they need help and support in making the transition to fatherhood (Maxwell et al., 2012). One way of reaching fathers can be by promoting programs in places frequented by men (including sporting venues and events, specific workplaces, religious institutions) and by

avoiding language that suggests provision of 'support'. This language may make men feel uncomfortable by suggesting they are not coping (Tehan & McDonald, 2010). Services which refuse to accept referrals without reference to fathers (either including fathers in the referral or explaining why they cannot be included) have higher levels of father engagement according to one author (Maxwell et al., 2012). Finally, if a child is placed in OOHC, it has been recommended that approaching non-resident fathers early on increases the chances they will have contact with the agency (Malm et al., 2012).

### *Retention*

Community awareness increases retention, as can dedicated clinics that focus on children and are not named in such a way as to identify parent problems (Watson, 2005). Another strategy to improve engagement at this stage is to provide parents with reminders of upcoming appointments (Watson, 2005) and maintain a continuous relationship with the family (Iannos & Antcliff, 2013).

It has been suggested that engaging the whole family in treatment planning keeps fathers engaged (Gordon et al., 2012). Once a father's needs have been identified, target services accordingly, and use community activities that provide a direct benefit to fathers to keep fathers engaged (Gordon et al., 2012).

#### 4.2.6. Demonstrate respect

Parents can be engaged with and retained in services by demonstrating genuineness, empathy, and respect (Iannos & Antcliff 2013; The Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, 2011). This can be done in practical ways, such as confirming appointments, being on time, and not cancelling or cutting appointments short (Lwin et al., 2014; Watson, 2005). Respect can also be demonstrated in how workers communicate with family members. Respectful communication between worker and parents is two-way rather than one-way, especially in decision-making (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.). Respectful communication means being open with parents about what they should expect with regard to timelines, court issues, and other matters (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016) and in visits and other contacts if the child is in OOHC (Gerring et al., 2008). Being sensitive and respectful when enquiring about parents' circumstances develops trust (Iannos & Antcliff, 2013).

Demonstrating respect fits well with a strengths-based approach. For example, clarifying expectations and goals and obtaining a commitment from the parent that they will engage in mutually identified tasks is both respectful and acknowledges the parent's strengths. For case planning meetings, communicate regularly with the parent beforehand to minimise the possibility of unanticipated issues being raised at the meeting (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Understanding a parent's past losses and stresses and the reasons behind their feelings (anger, for example) helps workers maintain respect and empathy (The Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, 2011).

Meeting with birth parents before they visit their children in OOHC can present opportunities to demonstrate respect. For example, workers can show respect in these meetings by correctly pronouncing family member names, paying attention to issues raised by parents in previous phone contacts, using a warm demeanour, and paying attention to physical surroundings (e.g. ensure parents have comfortable seating, no desk separating parent from worker). If notes are taken, explain that the

reason is to record the parent's progress and share the notes with the parent and the child's protection worker. As well as a warm manner, workers can display empathy for parents and enthusiasm for the possibilities in ongoing birth parent-child relationships, acknowledging that the parent-child relationship is long-lasting and influential, regardless of where the child is living (Gerring et al., 2008).

If children are in OOHC, workers can reassure birth parents as to any legal rights and emphasise that their child will always be a part of their family, regardless of permanency decisions (Gerring et al., 2008). At the same time, workers can offer suggestions on how parents can appropriately respond to problematic child behaviour in supervised visits. This should be approached cautiously and with respect so as not to undermine parents, and to acknowledge the damaging treatment parents may themselves have experienced as children. Alternative parenting strategies may be best introduced by modelling, rather than by discussion (Gerring et al., 2008).

During child protection investigations, another way to demonstrate respect is to focus on the current situation of the family rather than inappropriately revisiting the family's child protection history. Workers can explore the family's current circumstances and ensure caregivers don't feel that their history is constantly resurfacing when current concerns are different from past concerns. At the same time, workers can be honest, open, and transparent about their concerns and intentions (Lwin et al., 2014).

If parents are facing the reality that their children *will not* be restored to their family, workers can still show respect by engaging parents with compassion and providing opportunities for parents to voice anger, disappointment, and despair. Workers can maintain engagement by planning future contacts between birth parent and child (Gerring et al., 2008).

Workers can demonstrate respect for fathers by acknowledging strengths they observe during visits, and by noting the positive developmental outcomes for children who are actively involved with their father (NSW Department of Community Services, 2009).

#### 4.2.7. Address parents' practical needs

Parents may be better able to engage with services when they are supported in all areas where they are experiencing stress. One important way of supporting parents is to provide practical support such as by assisting parents' to address their immediate, practical concerns and working to remove barriers to access to services (Gerring et al., 2008). Some ways of doing this include:

- offering material and concrete support (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Watson, 2005)
- providing financial incentives for completing components of a program (Robinson et al., 2012; Watson 2005)
- providing transport for centre-based treatment (ideally taxis or other car transport) (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Watson, 2005)
- providing free child care during programs (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Watson, 2005)
- assisting parents and children to get ready to leave for centre-based programs (Watson, 2005)



- providing food and refreshments at centre-based programs (Watson, 2005).

Programs such as employment, mental health, or substance abuse interventions may be especially important for fathers (Maxwell et al., 2012). Parents may also need support to develop practical skills (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Watson, 2005).

With parents' permission, agencies are well placed to organise support from the wider community by inviting participation in case planning from anyone in the family's support system, such as extended family members, friends, teacher, clergy (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Gerring et al., 2008). In NSW, Family Finding could be used to help identify family members who may be able to provide support in such circumstances.

#### 4.2.8. Communicate clearly

Effective communication recognises the inherent inequality in the relationship between a worker and the parents and reduces stress and anxiety for parents and workers. It can increase the likelihood of active engagement and a more productive working relationship (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, 2017; QLD Department of Communities Child Safety and Disability Services, 2013). Clear and honest communication about the role of child protection, and about processes and expectations, is vital for engagement, especially if the parent has a history of mistrust of agencies (QLD Department of Communities Child Safety and Disability Services, 2013; The Child Welfare and Policy Practice Group, 2011)

Effective communication (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.; QLD Department of Communities Child Safety and Disability Services, 2013) is:

- open and honest
- positive and focussed on strengths
- non-judgemental
- respectful of strengths and positive attributes of the parents
- accommodating of special needs and circumstances
- able to incorporate the use of translators and interpreters when required
- jargon free and appropriate for the person's abilities and understanding
- aware of body language and eye contact, dress, and general appearance and how these can be used to establish rapport and put a person at ease (or how they can be misused to intimidate and control).

Effective communication involves the use of plain language suited to the developmental stages and capacities of parents (Gerring et al., 2008). It is suggested by Bromfield et al. (2012) that workers providing services or supports to parents have a tentative plan for how the meeting will run before first meeting with a family. Knowing what needs to be covered in a meeting allows the practitioner to be less anxious and to have a warm and calm approach to gathering information (Bromfield et al., 2012).

Practitioners should also be empathetic in their approach to parents (Lwin et al., 2014), provide feedback to parents about progress or lack of progress (Gerring et al.,



2008) and seek multiple perspectives from all family members when gathering information (Bromfield et al., 2012).

Where communication is difficult, especially where parents are reluctant to engage with services, workers may need extra support such as debriefings and supervision with managers or colleagues with particular expertise (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.).

Effective communication also requires workers to be aware of body language, moods, silences, distress, and noticeable omissions (Gerring et al., 2008).

In regards to communicating with fathers, the literature suggests being specific about what you are asking fathers to do, and giving information about how to do it. For example, 'read to child 5-10 minutes per day' and 'some books you might like to try include...'. Modelling the behaviour with the child can also be helpful (NSW Department of Community Services, 2009).

Practitioners should allow for fathers' personal style of communication. This may be achieved by getting to know the father and learning what language and style of communication works best. Don't assume that you can or can't talk to a father about feelings; however, rephrasing to ask 'how does that sit with you/what do you think about that' may be more useful than asking directly about feelings (NSW Department of Community Services, 2009). While these strategies were specifically referred to in the context of working with fathers, they may also be useful when working with mothers and other family members.

#### 4.2.9. Focus on empowering parents

Another potential way to increase parent engagement with services is by empowering them. This can be achieved by including them in decisions, encouraging them to make choices between options provided by workers (or encouraging them to come up with their own options); and by taking responsibility for seeking their own solutions, building incrementally on small successes (QLD Department of Communities Child Safety and Disability Services, 2013; Watson, 2005). Empowering parents reduces their dependency on services by increasing their problem-solving capacity, their involvement in planning, and utilising their strengths and skills (McDonald, 2010).

Family empowerment is an aim of the Solution-Based Casework approach (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). It is achieved by:

- capitalising on family strengths
- setting goals that use a family's specific language and culture to support family ownership
- creating concrete goals specifically matched to the family's needs
- tracking progress and celebrating interim successes.

Establishing shared decision making (Iannos & Antcliff, 2013) and assessing family strengths that are useful relative to challenges that must be overcome (The Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, 2011) are other ways of encouraging family empowerment.

Active participation in decisions is essential to engagement, and there are many ways to make it part of organisational culture and promote it (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d.):

- attempt to reduce parents' feelings of concern or mistrust (especially if the family has cultural or historical issues with government involvement)
- communicate clearly, explaining the process and the worker's role
- listen
- be aware of how body language, clothing, language, and use of tools, forms, and the physical environment affect engagement
- recognise the effect of language, behaviour, and dress on the participation of clients from particular cultures
- recognise and providing appropriate support for clients with disabilities and ensuring appropriate aids so that clients have necessary information
- arrange meetings in accessible locations and providing transport and mobility support if needed
- keep personal information confidential.

Empowering parents by involving them in case mapping conferences also improves engagement (Lwin et al., 2014). Mapping conferences are part of the Signs of Safety framework and they map out what the family is worried about, what strengths they have, and what needs to happen to address safety concerns. Focusing on family involvement, family strengths and family participation in decision-making in any form of safety and planning conference would help to empower parents.

Workers can empower parents to engage with change by taking on the role of a 'constructive parent' as achieved through modelling appropriate behaviour, especially with parents who are young, developmentally delayed or who did not receive effective parenting themselves. Parents may then feel more confident interacting with their child and more able to work on more challenging parenting tasks with workers. Praising parents for improvements can also empower them. Praising enables parents to feel that they have done something 'right' and helps them grow in confidence (Gerring et al., 2008).

If children have entered OOHC, it may be helpful to locate and empower other family members as well by involving them in the case decision-making process and in developing and fulfilling case plans (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

Strategies such as attending to fathers' mental health needs, strengthening their capacity to parent, and identifying their nurturing strengths all increase fathers' sense of self-competence. This can support their involvement with the child protection system and help them develop ways to be emotionally available to their children while maintaining a sense of manhood (Gordon et al., 2012).

#### 4.2.10. Create a good first impression

The way a service responds when parents first come into contact with them can influence subsequent engagement. To increase engagement early on, it is suggested that there should be a response from child protection workers within 48 hours while the family is in immediate protection crisis (Watson, 2005). Parents may

be more likely to engage while in a period of crisis (Watson, 2005). This review by Watson also found that engagement in the early stages of contact with families was higher when contact was initially on a weekly rather than monthly basis.

As has been covered in other sections, the initial service delivery environment can help workers engage with parents. A facilitated referral, known as a 'warm referral' in NSW, where the referring and referred to workers meet with the parent to introduce and pass on relevant information to other services, may be appropriate for some parents (Robinson et al., 2012).

The initial stages are important for engaging fathers. After gathering information about the father's involvement with the family (or other father-figure's involvement), one suggested strategy is to focus on the father's immediate environment and interests before dealing with perceived problems (NSW Department of Community Services, 2009). Other suggestions are to consider how to include fathers at the beginning of a family's involvement with a program (Tehan & McDonald, 2010), and to make sure services offered by referred agencies are designed to engage fathers (Malm et al., 2012).

#### 4.2.11. Maintain a non-judgemental stance

When trying to keep parents engaged with services, it is important to maintain a non-judgemental stance. This can be achieved by listening to parents, normalising their experiences, and reframing questions so as not to blame (Watson, 2005). This closely relates to using supportive behaviour but focuses on workers' attitudes towards parents (Iannos & Antcliff, 2013) and how these translate into behaviour.

When a child is in OOH, workers can show a non-judgemental stance during visits with birth parents by responding to parents and their needs before those of the child, or reversing this order if the parents take that to mean that they are the "problem". Workers can give time for parents to tell their story and express their emotions including anger and upset. Issues raised by parents or otherwise on the worker's agenda can be followed up later (Gerring et al., 2008, The Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, 2011). Workers can keep their immediate focus on what the child needs, rather than assigning blame (Iannos & Antcliff, 2013).

Part of the non-judgemental stance is seeking reasons for difficulties and understanding the factors getting in the way of effective and appropriate parenting. Workers can discuss these issues with parents, with other family members, and with other professionals and services the family may be involved with (Bromfield et al., 2012).

#### 4.2.12. Provide sufficient time for engagement

Engaging parents can take time, and allowing time to build the trust necessary for engagement at various stages of the child protection process is one important way agencies and workers can support parents. This needs to be balanced carefully against the need for workers to support parents to start changing aspects of their parenting in a positive way. However, engagement is an ongoing process that occurs throughout family involvement in child protection, rather than a step that occurs in the beginning only and ceases once intervention commences.

Some suggested ways to provide time for engagement during initial contact with clients include:

- allow recruitment time, working closely with other services which provide referrals and information about clients; this might include providing staff training and making presentations and other personal contacts (Watson, 2005)
- engagement with fathers can take time, and a relationship may take many small interactions to achieve (NSW Department of Community Services, 2009).

During ongoing contacts and to retain clients:

- let workers keep manageable caseloads (Watson, 2005)
- increase the amount of supervision available to caseworkers (Watson, 2005) to compensate for increased expectations on workers to undertake additional efforts to engage parents.

When deciding how to measure outcomes, evaluate outcomes achieved, not throughput. This may be in conflict with how services are assessed, if client turnover is an important metric (Watson, 2005).

#### 4.2.13. Streamline service provision

Parents should not have to deal with multiple agencies and staff to get help. Retention is reduced when parents are referred to multiple different places and professionals, and have to retell their story and re-establish relationships each time (Watson, 2005).

One caseworker per family is ideal (Watson, 2005). That worker should prepare adequately before the first meeting, gathering as much information as possible from case notes, records, and by speaking with others within and outside the agency. Try to minimise the need for parents to retell their story (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d).

#### 4.2.14. Adopt culturally appropriate practice

Several documents highlighted the importance of agencies and staff working in culturally appropriate ways. Culturally appropriate practices were identified in relation to Aboriginal families, and for culturally and linguistically diverse families. Specific strategies for engagement with specific populations are covered in the next section.

### 4.3. Strategies for engaging specific populations

Several strategies were identified which were specific to particular populations.

In this section, we include insights from source documents about: engaging with Aboriginal families; engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families; improving engagement between birth parents about foster carers; and engagement of clients who are perpetrators of family and domestic violence.

#### 4.3.1. Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

Working with Aboriginal families requires awareness of the cultural and historical factors that affect them, such as negative past experiences with child protection, forced removal of children and other past trauma experiences and associated feelings of grief and loss. An understanding of the role of family, kin and community in Aboriginal communities is also required (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d; QLD Department of Communities Child Safety and Disability Services, 2013).

NSW Department of Family and Community Services (n.d) suggestions for improving engagement with Aboriginal families are as follows:

- workers should undertake Aboriginal cultural training and maintain their understanding through ongoing supervision and/or accessing additional training and expertise.
- if a non-Aboriginal worker is working with an Aboriginal family, organise to have an Aboriginal worker accompany them
- consult with relevant Aboriginal workers, organisations, and community members
- understand the family network, including involving kin
- hold and demonstrate high expectations for success
- don't use the acronym ATSI to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; use the full term.

When working with Aboriginal families, NSW Department of Family and Community Services (2008) advises:

- understand the limits of your expertise: you have your own expertise to offer but Aboriginal families are experts in what it means to be an Aboriginal Australian
- network with Aboriginal workers and agencies
- understand that the concept of family in Aboriginal culture is broad, and that this has implications for decision-making processes within families
- address any ambivalence or anger the family has about your involvement with community services early—be thoughtful about initial contact. Readdress as your involvement with the family continues
- express genuine (but non-intrusive) inquisitiveness about family and culture
- use culturally appropriate resources
- be patient while overcoming mistrust, and respect and understand silence while families listen to and reflect on what is being said
- always give something back—time, resources, fun things for children
- never make promises or suggest outcomes that you cannot deliver

Specific communication skills that may enhance engagement with Aboriginal families include (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, 2008):

- remember names and relationships
- avoid too much direct eye contact; rely on local knowledge about what is appropriate.

#### 4.3.2. Engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families

Several documents suggested common strategies for working with refugee and migrant families (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d; NSW Department of Family and Community Services, 2010; QLD Department of Communities Child Safety and Disability Services, 2013). Strategies to work in a culturally appropriate way with culturally and linguistically diverse families include:

- recognise that communication and language services are central to successful engagement
- understand the specific values and cultural norms of the family and obtain cultural awareness training
- understand the impact of migration/settlement history and experience on the family and acknowledge that your presence may remind them of past experiences
- recognise diversity within cultural groups
- be aware of perceived and actual racism and discrimination experienced by the family or their cultural group
- make sure clients are clear about your role, your organisation's role, and how confidentiality works at your organisation (including when disclosure is required)
- don't assume that a client needs an interpreter, but provide an accredited (and possibly gender matched) interpreter if they do
- a person's proficiency with English (as an additional language) may deteriorate in stressful situations; workers speaking English with broken syntax is not the solution to overcoming language barriers
- get support from ethno-specific workers or organisations.

In addition, we identified one New Zealand government document (a Pacific Action Plan). This document suggested that organisations engage with community leaders and improve their own cultural competence via training and programs for supervisors and senior staff in order to better engage with Pacific Islander peoples (NZ Ministry of Social Development, 2010).

#### 4.3.3. Engagement between birth parents and foster carers

Strategies relating to worker-parent engagement when children are in OOHC are covered, with appropriate acknowledgement, in section 4.2. Here we present strategies for enhancing birth parents' engagement with foster carers. This is included because foster carers can be considered a component of child protection from the point of view of birth parents. All strategies below are from Gerring et al. (2008).

Suggested strategies for strengthening ties between birth parents and foster carers include:

- foster carers contact birth parents by phone prior to the first visit between parent and child, listening to the birth parent's story, responding to questions about the child, expressing eagerness to meet the birth parent, and generally reassuring and reinforcing that the carer's role in caring for the child is temporary while the birth parent's role as parent is permanent
- foster carers accompany children on contact visits: this can help children relate more favourably to birth parents, and birth parents and foster carers can make and develop connections



- when foster carers provide transportation to visits, it demonstrates their acceptance of the value of bringing the child to access visits and shows their approval of the birth parent.

#### 4.3.4. Engaging clients who are perpetrators of domestic and family violence

Strategies relating to fathers, as identified in frameworks and practice guides directed at professionals working with fathers, are included with the general strategies listed above, with appropriate indication. For the most part, these strategies were broadly similar to those for parents in general. However, the strategies for engaging fathers who are perpetrators of domestic and family violence are very different, and are presented here.

Working with clients who are perpetrators of domestic and family violence presents particular challenges. In this section, we provide suggestions from the literature about engaging with fathers who are perpetrators of domestic and family violence. We acknowledge that, although this is less prevalent, mothers can also engage in violent behaviours. However the focus of the material presented in the literature, and therefore in this section, is on fathers.

One of the challenges when engaging perpetrators of violence is to build rapport and engagement without excusing or colluding with his abusive behaviour (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2016) or, alternatively, without engaging in debate which risks endangering family members or workers (WA Department for Child Protection and Family Support, 2013).

Some strategies for workers to bear in mind are:

- maintain the non-judgemental stance described above, conveying belief that people can change their behaviour (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2016)
- give the client space to tell his story, without giving the impression that you endorse the violence-supporting part of his narrative (WA Department for Child Protection and Family Support, 2013)
- show empathy and understanding of how the client's life experiences have shaped his views and expectations, but without excusing or colluding with his abusive behaviour (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2016; WA Department for Child Protection and Family Support, 2013)
- take the client's cultural identity into account, but don't make assumptions about the role of cultural identity in his violence (WA Department for Child Protection and Family Support, 2013)
  - explore who in his community can support him to keep his family safe
  - identify aspects of culture that may affect his engagement with services and which may help him manage his emotions
  - offer the option for him to speak with someone older, younger, or of the same gender
  - offer to invite a cultural ally or advocate
- focus on the child's needs (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2016)

- identify positive reasons for changing and be able to recognise if client is ready to change (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2016; WA Department for Child Protection and Family Support, 2013)
- maintain engagement when referring to another service by explaining why you are referring, and the benefits and risks of referral to the client and his family (WA Department for Child Protection and Family Support, 2013)
- reflect on your own practice and keep up to date with knowledge in this field (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2016; WA Department for Child Protection and Family Support, 2013).

#### 4.4. When strategies are not working

NSW Department of Family and Community Services (n.d) suggests strategies for when engagement is difficult or not working, due to a family's previous bad experience with services, limited understanding of why the service is involved, concerns about being stigmatised, or for other reasons. Parents who have not engaged with services may avoid home visits, fail to attend appointments, or give repeated excuses as to why workers cannot see children.

Although many reasons for failing to engage or disengaging are innocuous, workers should be alert to persistent displays of avoidance, hostility, or reluctance to engage, which should be taken seriously.

Organisations should have policies and procedures in place to guide workers if engagement is not working. Some ways to improve engagement when other strategies are not working are to (NSW Department of Family and Community Services, n.d; QLD Department of Communities Child Safety and Disability Services, 2013):

- re-evaluate existing engagement strategies and communication techniques
- reflect and identify what has worked and not worked so far
- use strengths-based approaches to identify even small signs of engagement which can be built upon
- discuss issues and concerns with the client
- discuss concerns with your supervisor, manager, and colleagues
- debrief during supervision meetings.

#### 4.5. Barriers to engagement

Many documents cited potential barriers to parent engagement. We have grouped these into client, worker, service, and contextual factors. Agencies may not be able to remove or reduce all barriers, but they can adjust their engagement strategies to take them into account.

The full list of barriers is in Appendix D, and is summarised in Table 2 below. In the narrative summary following this table we describe barriers to engagement as presented in our source documents.



**Table 2. Barriers to parent engagement**

Level	Barrier
Client factors	Mistrust
	Practical issues
	Socio-demographic characteristics
	Attitude and relationship factors
	Factors relating to fathers
Worker factors	Individual factors
	Perceptions of fathers
Service factors	Service access
	Service culture
Contextual factors	Social and policy environment

#### 4.5.1. Client factors

Barriers identified at the client level are mistrust, practical issues, socio-demographic and father factors.

Parents may mistrust the child protection system as a whole, or individual child protection workers. They may have a personal history of negative experiences with the system. Aboriginal families have, in addition, cultural differences and connections to the stolen generations which act as a barrier to engagement. They may have fears that their parenting will be perceived as ‘not good enough’. Parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may also be intimidated by services due to past experiences or cultural differences. All parents are likely to experience a fear of losing their children permanently.

Practical issues such as cost, access to transport, eligibility rules, and program scheduling can prevent engagement with services, as can barriers due to parents’ mental function and fatigue. Socio-demographic factors including poverty, mental health issues, single parenting, can also create barriers. Multiple and complex needs, such as difficulty in meeting basic needs and exposure to domestic violence can also make it difficult for parents to engage with services. For culturally and linguistically diverse parents, language, citizenship, and status and create barriers.

In addition, parents may experience barriers due to attitudinal and relationship factors such as lack of confidence, stigma, not seeing services as useful, strained parental relationships, and concerns about confidentiality and exposure (when living with or leaving domestic and family violence).

Some barriers are specific to clients who are fathers. Fathers can be reluctant to engage because they don’t regard themselves as competent in caring for children and are reticent about seeking help. Entrenched beliefs and perceptions about the

roles of men and women can also make fathers feel that child and family services are not meant for them. Fathers may feel self-conscious or intimidated in the largely female domain of child and family services, or may feel that services will dictate how they should parent or not acknowledge their perspective on parenting. Fathers in particular may distrust services, and fathers involved with the criminal justice system may fear that the child protection system will exacerbate their problems with that system. Some fathers may fear that their relationships with current partners not related to the child may be affected; conversely, mothers may be reluctant to welcome fathers into spaces they see as a safe place, away from abusive partners.

Other reasons that engaging fathers may be difficult include mothers not revealing the identity of non-resident fathers, or difficulties with contact details or fathers' personal circumstances similar to those cited above.

#### 4.5.2. Worker factors

Workers may themselves present a barrier to engagement. Individual caseworkers may have a bias against some families, or may have concerns for their own safety. A worker may have expectations that families be involved in case conferences, but not articulate them in a way that supports involvement. With culturally and linguistically diverse families, there may be a cultural mismatch between workers and family, or lack of cultural understanding by the worker. The authors of this review note that this could also apply to Aboriginal families.

Worker barriers to engagement may be particularly prevalent for fathers. Workers may have difficulty involving, or perceiving change and improvement in, fathers they have previously labelled as 'bad'. They may have low expectations of non-resident father involvement, not reach out to them, and not consider them for kinship care. Team members may focus on shortcomings and reinforce each other's perceptions of fathers. Traditional practices in relation to gender and parenting may mean they focus on mothers and either exclude or make little effort to involve fathers.

#### 4.5.3. Service factors

Service access factors can be a barrier to engagement. For families involved in child protection who need to access other services outside the home, there may be difficulty reaching the service via public transport, but more importantly there may be non-physical barriers to access: families may not be aware of the service, may not believe they are eligible for the service, or may find the service intimidating or threatening. Eligibility criteria may be too narrow; but conversely having too many pathways to get help can introduce a barrier because families have to see many people to get the help they need.

Aspects of agency culture and ways of operating can act as a barrier. For example, for culturally and linguistically diverse families lack of an appropriate interpreter can be a barrier. Fathers may find service hours a barrier to access, or they may not know where to look for help. Some women clients may find the inclusion of men unsettling unless the service manages inclusion carefully.

#### 4.5.4. Contextual factors

The social and cultural context in which services operate can be a barrier to parent engagement. Child protection operates in a law enforcement and judicial environment. The primary role of child protection, which is to determine whether

there has been abuse and neglect, casts parents in the role of potential perpetrators and requires care in order to align with an approach which emphasises family strengths.

The risk- or deficit-oriented approach of many policies, structures, and processes, and the internalised shame parents may feel arising from behaviours that are not socially sanctioned may prevent parents engaging with services. Parents may feel that asking for help puts their child at risk of removal, particularly considering a real or perceived power differential between workers and parents.

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this review was to identify and summarise strategies to engagement of parents involved in the child protection system. The scope of the review included parent engagement with the broad range of agencies and workers that parents involved in the child protection system may be in contact with, rather than only child protection services.

Documents were sourced from bibliographic databases, organisation websites and from experts. Strategies were grouped together into categories and described. Barriers to engagement were also identified. In this section we summarise findings and address the research questions where possible. Gaps in the findings are also presented, as are limitations of this review. Factors to consider when implementing strategies in the NSW context are also described.

### 5.1. Summary of findings

#### 5.1.1. Strategies identified

This review identified 14 interrelated categories of strategies for engaging with birth parents. Some of the strategies are at the level of the worker and some are agency-level approaches. Leaving aside those papers which dealt with specific populations, the six most commonly endorsed categories were: ensuring service culture supports engagement, using supportive and strengths-based behaviours, being flexible, resourcing agencies appropriately, creating a good first impression, and demonstrating respect. Other strategy categories were identified less frequently, but all were endorsed more than once.

Most of the strategies identified would generally be considered good practice in working with families in any context, such as: considering the whole family and all their concerns, showing respect and building on strengths, communicating clearly and without judgement, collaborating effectively with other agencies. However, because of the circumstances of the families involved in child protection (e.g., histories of trauma, removal of children from the family) and because involvement in the child protection system is involuntary, these strategies are likely to be even more important, and may require a more concerted approach to engagement. This may involve the use of more strategies, longer-term engagement efforts, and an approach to engagement that underpins all work with families.

The majority of documents identified were Australian, with four specifically from NSW. We found no clear differences between the types of strategies identified in different jurisdictions with similar strategies identified across multiple documents. The only notable distinction was that Australian documents (and the one New Zealand document) had a focus on engaging different cultural groups, including indigenous families. These strategies were not identified in US, UK or Canadian documents. Other than that, strategies from all categories identified were seen in both Australian and international documents.

Although not consistently reported, some documents or strategies were identified that related specifically to particular points in the child protection continuum. Several documents noted strategies for use during assessment or intervention, however these were also similar to strategies where particular points in time were not

specified. Some authors did note the importance of early engagement to set up the relationship from the beginning.

There were some differences noted for engaging parents when they have children in OOHC. These typically referred to ways to engage parents in visits with the child or in their interactions with foster carers. Other strategies related to engagement when children are in OOHC could also be relevant to parents who have children in their care.

Very little detail was available on how to approach engagement based on specific circumstances of the family. The central message here was that approaches should cater for the individual needs and strengths of each family and the family members. Due to the extra concerns about engaging fathers, several documents highlight approaches to engage these parents, however the strategies described could be equally useful for all parents or other adult family members.

The reason for involvement in child protection was rarely mentioned in the included documents. The only occasion that warranted the identification of a unique set of strategies was the engagement of fathers who were perpetrators of family violence which may present additional challenges.

Distinctions were not made between agency or worker type so it is not possible to determine if any particular approaches may suit some more than others. The only exception was that a few strategies were found for foster carers' engagement of birth parents.

#### 5.1.2. Barriers to engagement

The literature identified several barriers to engagement. We grouped them into individual client level factors, worker factors, service factors and contextual or social factors. The barriers identified rarely exist in isolation, for instance social expectations about the role of fathers as parents influence how fathers see themselves and how workers see them. Some of the key barriers appear to be parental mistrust of child protection services, negative or stereotyped perceived roles of parents, and complex personal circumstances. Strategies that emphasise support for parents in their roles, empathy for their circumstances and understanding of the past experiences with services may help to reduce these barriers.

Many barriers apply to parents in general; however, some related specifically to fathers and to Aboriginal families and culturally and linguistically diverse parents. Social and historical or past experiences with child protection or other services have a great impact on future engagement for most parents, with clear examples highlighted for these specific populations.

The key purpose of child protection itself and indeed the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 may, in some instances, get in the way of engagement. The primary goal of the Act is to keep children safe from harm, sometimes resulting in removal of children. The focus of child protection is therefore often on identification of and responding to risks. This is a distinctly deficit focused rather than strengths-based approach and may create barriers of fear and mistrust.

#### 5.2. Gaps in the findings

Several gaps in knowledge appear to exist. It is possible that particular service or worker types require different engagement strategies or that some parent factors

lend themselves to specific engagement strategies. This information was not identified in this review. In terms of points in the child protection continuum, we found no information to guide the engagement of parents who are in the process of relinquishing their children. Strategies ceased at the point of post-restoration.

### 5.3. Factors to consider when implementing strategies in the New South Wales context

This scoping review has summarised a range of strategies that may help increase engagement of parents involved in the child protection system. A considerable amount of this content was written specifically in relation to the Australian child protection system, including NSW. This section describes factors to be considered when implementing these strategies in the NSW child protection context. These factors are listed in box 4.

#### Box 4. Factors to consider when implementing strategies

1. Building engagement requires leadership by decision-makers in the child protection system
2. Engagement requires a multi-strategy approach
3. Early engagement can build strong relationships
4. All family members need support to engage
5. The impact of the history of forced removal on engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
6. The values, beliefs and needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families
7. The diverse circumstances of families with a child in care
8. Working with domestic and family violence requires additional support
9. Some engagement may be new to parents and workers
10. Further research is required to understand engagement during the process of guardianship and open adoption
11. Effectiveness of engagement strategies is unknown
12. The engagement process is only one component of effective service provision

#### 5.3.1. Building engagement requires leadership by decision-makers in the child protection system

For agencies to have the authorisation and support required to adopt a culture of parent engagement, governments and service systems must lead engagement initiatives. High-level authorisation is needed to enable the infrastructure and leadership required to adequately resource services, support the implementation and monitoring of strategies, and recruit, train, supervise and support staff appropriately.

Suitable high-level governance of engagement initiatives also provides the opportunity to ensure that services are streamlined and that relevant agencies work together to engage parents. This can be facilitated by developing joint protocols and information sharing agreements which are critical considerations in interagency work (Macvean et al., 2015).

### 5.3.2. Engagement requires a multi-strategy approach

The strategies identified in this review have been organised into categories; however, these are not discrete practices that are likely to be used in isolation. Many of the strategies overlap, are related, or share similar qualities. A more effective approach may be to incorporate several engagement strategies as part of an approach to working with birth parents.

### 5.3.3. Early engagement can build strong relationships

Applying an engagement model that fosters engagement from the moment families become known to child protection services will help establish parents' understanding of their relationship with child protection. Building engaging relationships from the beginning will help set parents up for engagement throughout their time with child protection.

### 5.3.4. All family members need support to engage

In this report, we have noted several strategies that particularly focus on engagement of fathers. Many documents addressed this population because fathers are typically less engaged in services. From the literature, we are able to draw on strategies specifically for engaging fathers, but the strategies identified are likely to be relevant to other family members as well. Any approach to engagement should include all family members, including mothers, fathers, children and siblings, and any other significant family member. This may present additional complexities when the child is not residing with the family or when the parents are not together. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider the unique make-up of each family and adapt accordingly.

Families involved in the child protection system have multiple and complex needs, often with several family members presenting with issues or concerns. An approach to engaging families should consider the multiple needs of all family members. A useful way to consider parent engagement in the context of child protection is from an ecological systems perspective (Belsky, 1993; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). All family members are interrelated, as are their concerns. What affects one family member will affect other family members. Family member issues and any interventions received will impact other members of the family. Engagement that considers the whole family, or indeed the whole community, will have a flow on effect to other family members.

### 5.3.5. The impact of the history of forced removal on engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

When working with Aboriginal peoples there are additional considerations for engagement, as noted in the review findings. Aboriginal families have had a negative history of intergenerational trauma in association with child protection, particularly in regards to the government sanctioned forced removal of Aboriginal children. These experiences can compound the challenges of engagement and require additional efforts to address. Workers need to collaborate with Aboriginal community members to determine preferred ways of interacting, engaging and participating.



#### 5.3.6. The values, beliefs and needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families

Working with culturally and linguistically diverse families requires more than just the use of interpreters where needed. An understanding of cultural history, customs and experiences is required. This needs to be understood for each individual family, as much diversity exists within each cultural group. The work FACS has undertaken recently to establish cultural care plans with Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse families is one way forward in this regard.

#### 5.3.7. The diverse circumstances of families with a child in care

Throughout the review we noted when the literature focussed specifically on engagement when children are in OOHC. The nature of support provided to birth parents in these situations may need to be quite different as they may have limited time or capacity to implement changed behaviour with their children, as may be required by court orders and when working towards restoration. Parents will be dealing with issues such as grief, loss and guilt. Several strategies were identified specifically related to engagement with foster cares who are possibly a good resource for building and maintaining engagement during OOHC placements.

#### 5.3.8. Working with domestic and family violence requires additional support

This review identified several perpetrator-specific strategies. There may be additional considerations that need to be taken into account when engaging with families in circumstances of domestic and family violence. Some parents may not view the involvement of their partner or former partner as desirable where there are safety fears or concerns of blame and fault. Where there has been family violence, engagement of both parents at the same time may not be possible, appropriate, safe or legal (in the case of apprehended violence orders). If a perpetrator cannot be engaged to the extent needed to ensure their understanding of how their violence affects their children, it will be difficult to work with them productively. Any measures taken to engage parents need to factor in families' histories, including current domestic violence issues.

#### 5.3.9. Some engagement strategies may be new to parents and workers

Those working toward engagement of parents need to acknowledge that these approaches may be unfamiliar to parents. Aiming to support and engage parents and to build on their strengths and provide opportunities for decision making may not match their concept of or previous experiences with child protection services. Some of the strategies identified here may also be unfamiliar to workers so agencies will need to seek advice about optimal methods for successful implementation, make plans for implementation and evaluate implementation of strategies.

#### 5.3.10. Further research is required to understand engagement during the process of guardianship and open adoption

This review did not identify any strategies that specifically related to engagement of birth parents during the processes leading up to arrangements where the resolution is permanent residence in someone else's care, either through permanent guardianship or open adoption. A different approach may be required to support parents suitably towards guardianship or relinquishment through adoption. In addition, while not a focus of this review, there may be alternate strategies to apply to engage birth parents post-guardianship, post relinquishment, and into adoption.



Further research is needed to determine suitable approaches and strategies in these circumstances.

#### 5.3.11. Effectiveness of engagement strategies is unknown

The purpose of this review was to describe engagement strategies from frameworks, policies and practices guides, including ones that may have been evaluated. The review authors did not seek to assess the effectiveness of these strategies for improving engagement. Further work is required to test which of these strategies or which combination of strategies works best and for whom.

#### 5.3.12. The engagement process is only one component of effective service provision

This review has presented a series of strategies that could follow families along their journey in child protection, regardless of agency, service provider, place in the continuum or services and interventions provided. These strategies may help parents to take up, remain in or complete programs, however to result in improved outcomes for children and parents, consideration must be paid to the evidence for the broader services and practices offered to parents. Engagement in programs that are not suitable or effective will not benefit parents or children.

### 5.4. Limitations

This scoping review included only English language documents that were available online. Books, theses, chapters, and conference papers were excluded. Authors and publishing organisations were not contacted for further information.

The scope of this work covered frameworks, policies, practice guidance documents and reviews of strategies. Additional information about parent engagement may be available in the literature not covered here.

### 5.5. Conclusion

This scoping review identified several reasons why engagement with parents involved in child protection may be challenging, including parental mistrust of child protection services, negative or stereotyped perceived roles of parents, and complex personal circumstances. The review also identified strategies to increase engagement such as: ensuring service culture supports engagement, using strengths-based behaviours, being flexible, resourcing agencies appropriately, creating a good first impression, and demonstrating respect.

The central message of these strategies is to apply the principles of good practice, but with additional efforts or allowances for the multiple and complex needs of the families. Efforts to engage parents may work best when senior leaders and service systems more broadly provide an authorising environment for engagement, when a multi-strategy approach is used, and when engagement efforts are early and on-going. Additional consideration should be paid to the cultural needs of families, to engagement of parents with children in care including engagement with foster carers, and when working with perpetrators of violence.

Implementing an engagement model consisting of strategies identified here may encourage parents to join and stay involved in services and successfully complete programs. Coupled with evidence-based interventions, this may result in improved circumstances for children and families.

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# Appendix A Methodology

## A.1 Scoping review

We used a scoping review method to identify strategies for engaging parents who are involved in the child protection system. A scoping review aims to map rapidly the key concepts underpinning a research area and the main sources and types of evidence available, and can be undertaken as stand-alone projects in their own right, especially where an area is complex or has not been reviewed comprehensively before (Arksey & O'Malley, 2003).

## A.2 Child protection

The child protection system refers to services and service systems that intervene when children have been harmed or are at risk of harm. Harm/risk of harm may be due to intentional or unintentional abuse or neglect or by parent or child, or any family circumstances that places the children at risk because the parent is unable or unwilling to protect them.

Involvement in the continuum of child protection at any stage was in scope, from the time of first notification, prevention of placement, placement in out-of-home care (OOHC), restoration, and stabilisation. Children may or may not have been living with their birth parents. Once involved in the child protection system, families may have contact with various services and workers such as police, government child protection departments, out-of-home care services, kinship and foster carers, courts, and specialist programs and services. Engagement with the child protection system included engagement with any services and workers during parents' involvement with child protection, including OOHC carers.

## A.3 Types of participants

This review was concerned with engagement of parents in families where children have come to the attention of child protection services. In most cases this referred to birth parents, but could also include other adults acting in the parenting role such as grandparents or other family members. Age range for children included prenatal through to young adulthood. Children and families could present with any type of concern that had resulted in harm or risk of harm for the child(ren).

Foster carers or kinship carers (where kinship carers are providing out-of-home care as an alternative to birth parents) were not in scope.

## A.4 Engagement

We were interested in the approaches, policies and practices used within structures, agencies and workers who work with families involved in the child protection system to engage with parents. We adopted the NSW Department of Family and Community Services' definition of engagement as a process of 'establishing effective working relationships so that there can be a shared understanding of goals and a shared commitment to supporting the child or young person'.

<http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/kts/engaging/what>

Parent engagement could be referred to by other terminology such as partnership, collaboration, and working with, etc.



Documents detailing how to maintain birth parents' engagement with their children during OOHC were excluded.

## **A.5 Types of documents**

We searched for Australian and international published and unpublished documents, including practice and legislative frameworks, policies, policy comparisons and analyses, practice guides, and reviews. These documents did not have to include evaluations. There were no restrictions on study design. Only documents available online were included. No limits were placed on date of publication. Only English language documents were included.

Documents had to have a central focus on parent or family engagement in services or service systems relevant to the continuum of involvement in child protection. Documents which had only minimal or incidental content on parent engagement were excluded.

Documents where the focus is on child protection systems without regard to birth parent involvement were excluded.

Books, thesis, conference presentations, and book chapters were excluded.

## **A.6 Identification of documents**

Documents were identified in March 2017 via a search of bibliographic databases, organisation websites and by requesting documents from FACS and the authors' expert colleagues. Search terms used to search PsycInfo, MEDLINE and Social Work Abstracts on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2017 appear in box 5.

### **Box 5. EBSCO search terms with Abstract for field**

1. (parent\* or mother\* or father\* or family or families) N3 (engag\* or involv\* or collabor\* or participat\* or consult\* or coproduce\* or co-produc\* or empower\* or partner\* or alliance\*)
2. (child protect\* or child welfare or CPS or out-of-home care or out of home care or foster care or kinship care or residential care or group home or group care or family stabil\* or family preservation or reunif\* or family restor\* or placement prevention)
3. (framework\* or policy or policies or practice guide\* or practice manual\* or child protection manual\* or agenda\* or practice context\* or practice\* or model\* or strateg\*)
4. 1 AND 2 AND 3

Database search results were exported to Endnote, where duplicates were removed. Reviewers used the above descriptions of child protection, types of participants, engagement and types of documents to determine suitability for inclusion. One reviewer screened titles and abstracts. Full text was retrieved if abstracts appeared relevant. One reviewer screened full text papers. All potential inclusions were confirmed by the lead reviewer. Websites searched for additional documents appear in Table 3.



**Table 3. Organisation websites searched**

Organisation	Website
Australian Catholic University Institute of Child Protection Studies	<a href="http://www.acu.edu.au/about_acu/faculties_institutes_and_centres/centres/institute_of_child_protection_studies">http://www.acu.edu.au/about_acu/faculties_institutes_and_centres/centres/institute_of_child_protection_studies</a>
Australian Institute of Family Studies: Child Family Community Australia	<a href="https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/">https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/</a>
Association of Children's Welfare Agencies	<a href="http://www.acwa.asn.au/">http://www.acwa.asn.au/</a>
Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet: Closing the Gap	<a href="http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/closing-the-gap">http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/closing-the-gap</a>
Australian Institute of Family Studies	<a href="https://aifs.gov.au">https://aifs.gov.au</a>
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare	<a href="http://www.aihw.gov.au">http://www.aihw.gov.au</a>
Australian Policy Online	<a href="http://apo.org.au/">http://apo.org.au/</a>
Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services	<a href="http://www.c4eo.org.uk/">http://www.c4eo.org.uk/</a>
Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal	<a href="http://cwrp.ca">http://cwrp.ca</a>
Centre for Effective Services	<a href="http://www.effectiveservices.org/">http://www.effectiveservices.org/</a>

Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare	<a href="http://www.cfecfw.asn.au/">http://www.cfecfw.asn.au/</a>
Child Welfare Information Gateway	<a href="https://www.childwelfare.gov">https://www.childwelfare.gov</a>
Child, Youth and Family New Zealand	<a href="http://www.cyf.govt.nz">http://www.cyf.govt.nz</a>
Government of Western Australia Department for Child Protection and Family Support	<a href="http://www.dcp.wa.gov.au/Pages/Home.aspx">http://www.dcp.wa.gov.au/Pages/Home.aspx</a>
National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)	<a href="https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-protection-system/">https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-protection-system/</a>
NSW Department of Family and Community Services child protection research	<a href="http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/research-centre/child-protection-research">http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/research-centre/child-protection-research</a>
PeakCare Queensland Inc	<a href="http://www.peakcare.org.au/">http://www.peakcare.org.au/</a>
Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services	<a href="https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety/protecting-children/resources-publications">https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety/protecting-children/resources-publications</a>
South Australia Department of Child Protection	<a href="https://www.childprotection.sa.gov.au/">https://www.childprotection.sa.gov.au/</a>
Social Care Institute for Excellence	<a href="http://www.scie.org.uk/">http://www.scie.org.uk/</a>
Territory Families	<a href="https://nt.gov.au/">https://nt.gov.au/</a>

University of South Australia, Australian Centre for Child Protection	<a href="http://www.unisa.edu.au/Research/Australian-Centre-for-Child-Protection/Publications_Presentations/container/Pubs-Pres-and-Featured/Publications/">http://www.unisa.edu.au/Research/Australian-Centre-for-Child-Protection/Publications_Presentations/container/Pubs-Pres-and-Featured/Publications/</a>
Victorian Department of Human Services	<a href="http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au">http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au</a>

Websites searches were screened online by title and abstract. Potentially relevant full text documents were exported to Endnote where we determined if the document had already been identified through the database search. If so, it was excluded. Remaining documents were assessed for eligibility, with final inclusions confirmed by the lead reviewer.

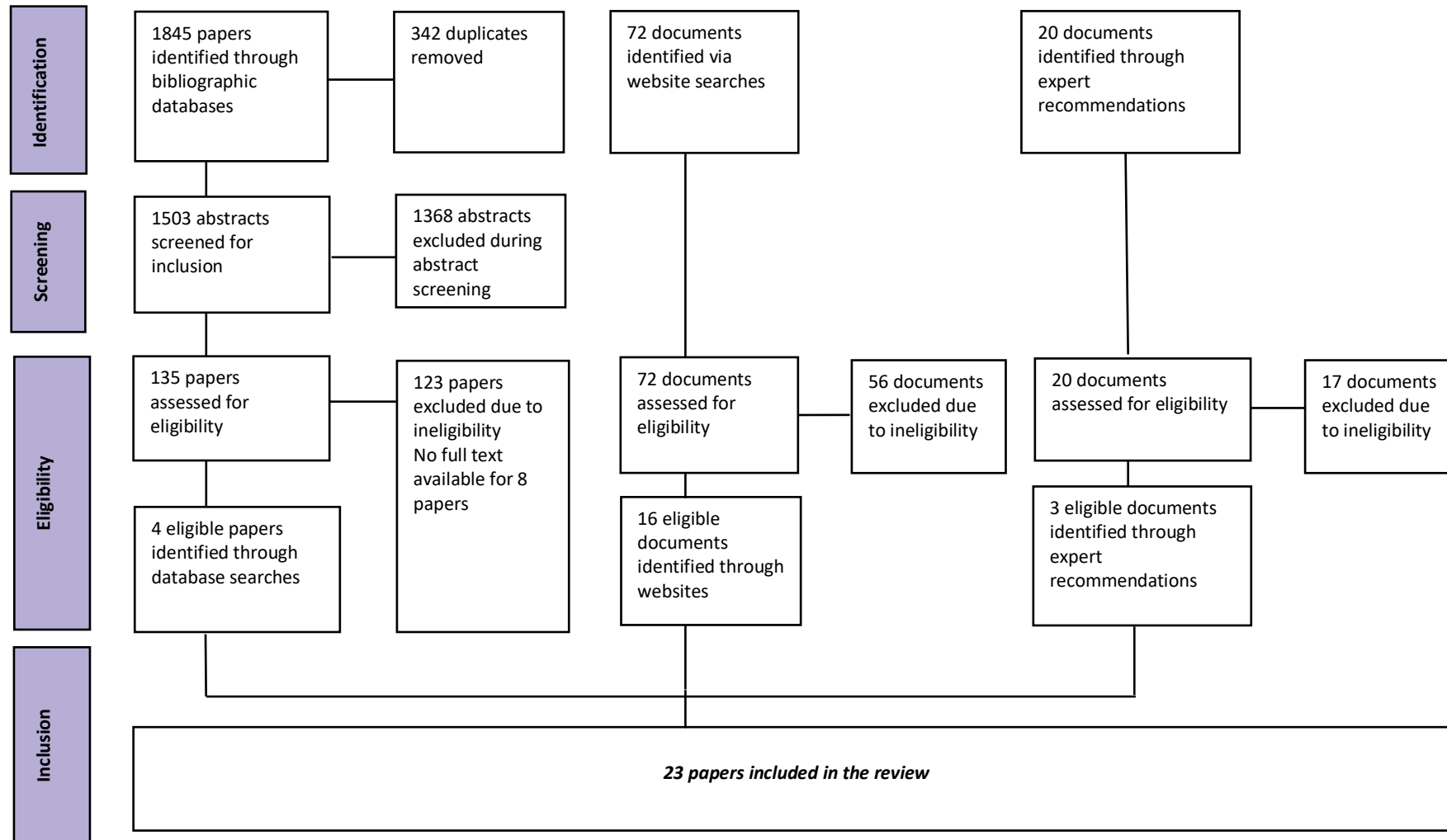
All documents identified by experts were exported to Endnote where we determined if the document had already been identified through other sources. If so, it was excluded. Remaining documents were assessed for eligibility, with final inclusions confirmed by the lead reviewer.

## **A.7 Data extraction, analysis and synthesis**

The review team extracted data from included documents into data extraction forms. This included detailed information about how to engage parents, jurisdiction, point of contact on the child protection continuum, family circumstances, service and worker type. Barriers to engagement were also extracted. Similarities and difference across these factors were analysed. Themes across engagement strategies were identified and strategies were categorised. Barriers were also grouped into categories. Findings were synthesised narratively.

## Appendix B Flow chart of document selection

Figure 1. Flowchart of papers through the study selection process



## Appendix C Strategies identified from documents included in the scoping review

These strategies are summarised in the results section of this report. The results section provides additional detail and context, and strategy sources. This list should be used in conjunction with the full report.

### C.1 Strategies categorised as *ensure service culture supports engagement*

General strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a service culture that encourages a continuous relationship with the family</li> <li>- a service culture that encourages a holistic understanding of parents' circumstances</li> <li>- maintain good interagency relationships</li> <li>- promote collaboration between organisations</li> <li>- develop relationships with other agencies</li> <li>- promote and deliver their services in a non-stigmatising way</li> <li>- ensure cultural competency for specific populations both among caseworkers and across the organisation, but at the same time recognise the parents as experts on their own unique situation</li> </ul>
Specific strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- workers acknowledge all of the stressors impacting on a family</li> <li>- workers have a good working knowledge of parents' defensive patterns and developmental needs</li> <li>- workers have a sound understanding of relationships and parent-child bonding</li> <li>- organisations have an understanding of trauma theory and the ongoing impact of trauma on mental health and on future experiences</li> <li>- services reflect on the barriers to engagement that the parents may have experienced previously</li> <li>- services match workers to families in order to increase identification with the worker and help overcome such barriers</li> <li>- maintain good records</li> <li>- promote ongoing discussions</li> <li>- be clear about which issues are negotiable and which non-negotiable</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Include parents formerly involved with child protection services in activities such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o boards and committees</li> <li>o evaluating services and programs</li> <li>o employing parents as practice advisors and trainers, and</li> <li>o encouraging parents to advocate for change</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Strategies for specific populations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- create father-friendly service environments (for example displaying images and handouts that convey positive images of men interacting with children)</li> <li>- maintain a positive attitude towards men</li> <li>- include male staff or volunteers 'front of house'</li> <li>- male facilitators may be more appropriate than female in some circumstances</li> <li>- recognise that the father's positive role may make the difference rather than gender of workers</li> <li>- all staff, male or female, have a commitment to including fathers while not marginalising female clients</li> <li>- encourage workers to reflect on their interactions with fathers</li> <li>- provide staff development on working with fathers and father-specific practice and address workers' concerns regarding non-resident fathers</li> <li>- Improving information exchange and collaboration across agencies (raised in relation to fathers but applicable to all)</li> </ul>

## C.2 Strategies categorised as ***use supportive and strengths-based behaviours***

General strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- support parents and the family as a whole</li> <li>- get to know the family, establish a relationship, and develop an understanding of their strengths and needs before developing a case plan</li> <li>- foster a trusting and supportive relationship (e.g. mothers were more likely to continue with a program if they were visited when pregnant, rather than after their baby is born)</li> </ul>

Specific strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- use verbal encouragement and avoid authoritarian language which can create distance and seem threatening</li> <li>- be a consistent, committed presence in parent contact visits with children by supporting the parent and helping parents and children relive happier times in earlier visits</li> <li>- help parents and children develop rituals for ending visitation sessions which will help minimise the sense of loss, endure any necessary separation, and provide reassurance about future visits</li> <li>- use non-stigmatising branding for agencies by, for example, calling a service Child Support Services rather than using terms associated with child protection</li> <li>- focus on family <i>strengths</i>- identify parents' strengths and build on them. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o E.g. help identify a time when a parent was able to appropriately care for their child, which may help the parent to draw on the skills used during this successful time in future interactions with their child, thereby helping to change their parenting behaviour.</li> </ul> </li> <li>- allow parents to tell their stories without interruption before exploring and addressing things that may affect their ability to care for their family</li> <li>- identify what parents are doing well (including asking them what they think they are doing well) and what resources they have available</li> <li>- set realistic and achievable goals which are mutually agreed upon, allowing family members choice (where possible)</li> <li>- acknowledge and validate parents' feelings, use positive language and celebrate progress and successes with families</li> <li>- emphasise family member preferences and involve extended family and a range of community services when developing case plans and making decisions</li> </ul>
Strategies for specific populations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- tell fathers about the contribution they make to their families and avoid the 'expert' role.</li> <li>- focus on and reinforce the connection between father and child, and work with mothers to support fathers' involvement.</li> <li>- address questions about the child to the father as well as to the mother</li> <li>- recognise and take into account the diversity of fathers': <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o attitudes to parenting, parenting skills and abilities</li> <li>o cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



- show an understanding of fathers' behaviour in the context of adherence to traditional masculine norms and help them to develop ways to be emotionally available to their children while maintaining a sense of manhood. This is especially true for fathers who are from minority backgrounds, and others who feel disenfranchised from and distrustful of the system

### C.3 Strategies categorised as ***be flexible***

General strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- if parents can't keep appointments, be understanding, but be persistent to ensure that interviews and visits take place</li> <li>- collaborate with other agencies to arrange support for parents if necessary. This should ideally occur during assessment and planning stages, but other agencies should be able to be called in at any stage</li> <li>- be inclusive and flexible when children are in OOHC. Parents may particularly benefit from having visits with their children in homelike settings, preparing parents and children for visits, tailoring visits to child and family needs, and having supportive involvement from foster carers</li> </ul>
Specific strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- reduce eligibility criteria if parents are having trouble accessing services</li> <li>- have multiple referral pathways and gateways into a service</li> <li>- consider family members' other obligations when planning meetings, and schedule accordingly</li> <li>- schedule visits on weekends or evenings if necessary</li> <li>- have multiple contact points for families, such as extended family members, in case the family's contact details change</li> <li>- start where the family is (e.g. if parents are worried about the next meal, caseworkers should not start by addressing alternative ways of responding to problematic child behaviour simply because covering responses to child behaviour was planned for that day)</li> </ul>
Strategies for specific populations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- build discussions around an activity and provide hands-on learning opportunities</li> </ul>

- reduce discomfort by having worker interacting side-by-side with father rather than face-to-face
- offer flexible service hours
- consult fathers as to what services they require
- take into account diverse attitudes to parenting and diverse family
- provide ongoing assessment and adjustment
- focus on the couple relationship even in couples who are not cohabiting; that is, consider their relationship even though one member of the couple may not be living in the home with the child
- have male staff or male volunteers
- hold child and family activities in 'male friendly' spaces (e.g. sporting clubs, workplaces)

#### C.4 Strategies categorised as **resource agencies appropriately**

General strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If children are in OOHC, engagement may be improved if workers make visits between children and parents lively and fun, with space and expectation for games and activities, and with birth parents encouraged not to raise issues and concerns until after the session</li> <li>- ensure adequate staff for development and supervision</li> <li>- develop joint protocols for working with other agencies</li> </ul>
Specific strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- have available brokerage funds for staff to respond to families' immediate practical needs</li> <li>- provide toll-free contact numbers</li> <li>- use internet, social media, Skype, telephone conferencing, and smartphones to engage parents</li> <li>- allow families access to services with the least paperwork possible</li> <li>- present a welcoming physical environment for meetings, with space, accessibility, and representation of the child via alternative means (photos, artwork) if the child cannot be physically present and set up play areas for children (have staff play with them, allowing parents to learn by example)</li> <li>- stable allocation of the same caseworker to a family long-term</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- frequent and substantive caseworker visits</li> <li>- weekly or more frequent contact between parents and caseworkers though this can be stepped back as work progresses</li> <li>- use peer mentors (parents who were once involved with the child protection system) to help parents meet case plan goals and navigate the system</li> <li>- provide parents with opportunities to socialise with other parents</li> </ul>
Strategies for specific populations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- train staff in culturally appropriate practice and programs</li> <li>- make specific efforts to contact and engage fathers</li> <li>- include the term 'father' as well as 'mother' or 'parent' in all forms, assessments, guidelines, checklists, handouts, and promotional materials and display positive images of fathers. However, use caution, as some fathers may be more self-conscious about attending a service labelled as being for fathers.</li> <li>- use mediation rather than litigation to resolve custody disputes</li> <li>- provide guidance and training for caseworkers on identifying and involving non-resident fathers</li> <li>- develop an assessment system that is common or linked across the service system</li> <li>- provide workers with training in working with fathers and a staff manager dedicated to engaging with men</li> <li>- provide programs specifically for men</li> </ul>

### C.5 Strategies categorised as ***go where the parents are***

General strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- workers can reach out into the community both before/at intake, and during clients' involvement. Parents may be more likely to attend non-mandated services if the services are already well known in the community.</li> <li>- services and workers may need to work out where parents gather (e.g. shops, parks, sporting venues, other government services) and go to them or ensure their services are accessible</li> <li>- community awareness increases retention as well as engagement at intake, as can dedicated clinics that focus on children and are not named in such a way as to identify parent problems</li> </ul>

Specific strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- conduct assertive outreach via home visits, and accompanying a known worker on initial visits</li> <li>- recruit parents through agencies that are not seen as representing authority (such as needle exchanges, food charities, general health services); let those agencies act as ambassadors</li> <li>- start outreach visits during pregnancy rather than after the child is born</li> <li>- provide parents with reminders of upcoming appointments and maintain a continuous relationship with the family.</li> </ul>
Strategies for specific populations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- promote programs in places frequented by men (including sporting venues and events, specific workplaces, religious institutions)</li> <li>- avoid language that suggests provision of 'support', which may make men feel uncomfortable by suggesting they are not coping</li> <li>- if a child is placed in OOHC, approaching non-resident fathers early on increases the chances they will have contact with the agency</li> <li>- engaging the whole family in treatment planning may keep fathers engaged</li> <li>- once a father's needs have been identified, target services accordingly, and use community activities that provide a direct benefit to fathers to keep fathers engaged</li> <li>- develop an assessment system that is common or linked across the service system</li> <li>- provide workers with training in working with fathers and a staff manager dedicated to engaging with men</li> <li>- provide programs specifically for men</li> </ul>

## C.6 Strategies categorised as ***demonstrate respect***

General strategies
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- demonstrate genuineness, empathy, and respect
- understand a parent's past losses and stresses and the reasons behind their feelings such as anger
- display empathy for parents and enthusiasm for the possibilities in ongoing birth parent-child relationships, acknowledging that the parent-child relationship is long-lasting and influential, regardless of where the child is living

#### Specific strategies

- confirm appointments, be on time, and don't cancel or cut appointments short
- use two-way communication between worker and parents rather than one-way, especially in decision-making
- be open with parents about what they should expect with regard to timelines, court issues, and other matters and in visits and other contacts if the child is in OOHC
- be sensitive and respectful when enquiring about parents' circumstances
- clarify expectations and goals and obtain a commitment from the parent that they will engage in mutually identified tasks
- communicate regularly with the parent before case planning meetings to minimise the possibility of unanticipated issues being raised at the meeting
- in meetings, correctly pronounce family member names, pay attention to issues raised by parents in previous phone contacts, use a warm demeanour, and pay attention to physical surroundings (e.g. ensure parents have comfortable seating, no desk separating parent from worker).
- if taking notes, explain that the reason is to record the parent's progress and share the notes with the parent and the child's protection worker.
- if children are in OOHC, reassure birth parents as to any legal rights and emphasise that their child will always be a part of their family, regardless of permanency decisions.
- offer suggestions on how parents can appropriately respond to problematic child behaviour in supervised visits. This should be approached cautiously and with respect so as not to undermine parents, and to acknowledge the damaging treatment parents may themselves have experienced as children. Alternative parenting strategies may be best introduced by modelling, rather than by discussion
- during child protection investigations, focus on the current situation of the family rather than inappropriately revisiting the family's child protection history. Explore the family's current circumstances and ensure caregivers don't feel that their history is constantly resurfacing when current concerns are different from past concerns.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- be honest, open, and transparent about concerns and intentions for children</li> <li>- if children <i>will not be</i> restored to their family, engage parents with compassion and providing opportunities for parents to voice anger, disappointment, and despair. If appropriate, plan future contacts between birth parent and child</li> </ul>
Strategies for specific populations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- acknowledging fathers' strengths observed during visits</li> <li>- note the positive developmental outcomes for children who are actively involved with their father</li> </ul>

#### C.7 Strategies categorised as ***address parents' practical needs***

General strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- provide practical support by assisting parents to address their immediate, practical concerns and working to remove barriers to access to services</li> <li>- parents may need support to develop practical skills</li> </ul>
Specific strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- offer material and concrete support</li> <li>- provide financial incentives to complete components of a program</li> <li>- provide transport for centre-based treatment (ideally taxis or other car transport)</li> <li>- provide free child care during programs</li> <li>- assist parents and children to get ready to leave for centre-based programs</li> <li>- provide food and refreshments at centre-based programs</li> <li>- invite participation (with family's permission) in case planning from anyone in the family's support system, such as extended family members, friends, teacher, clergy. Family Finding may be able to assist in NSW</li> </ul>
Strategies for specific populations

- programs such as employment, mental health, or substance abuse interventions may be especially important for fathers

### C.8 Strategies categorised as ***communicate clearly***

General strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- maintain clear and honest communication about the role of child protection, and about processes and expectations</li> <li>- be empathetic in approach to parents</li> <li>- where communication is difficult, workers may need extra support such as debriefings and supervision with managers or colleagues with particular expertise</li> </ul>
Specific strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- characteristics of effective communication:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o open and honest</li> <li>o positive and focussed on strengths</li> <li>o non-judgemental</li> <li>o respectful of strengths and positive attributes of the parents</li> <li>o accommodating of special needs and circumstances</li> <li>o able to incorporate the use of translators and interpreters when required</li> <li>o jargon free and appropriate for the person's abilities and understanding</li> <li>o aware of body language and eye contact, dress, and general appearance and how these can be used to establish rapport and put a person at ease (or how they can be misused to intimidate and control).</li> </ul> </li> <li>- use plain language suited to the developmental stages and capacities of parents</li> <li>- have a tentative plan for how the meeting will run before first meeting with a family; knowing what needs to be covered in a meeting allows the practitioner to be less anxious and to have a warm and calm approach to gathering information</li> <li>- provide feedback to parents about progress or lack of progress and seek multiple perspectives from all family members when gathering information</li> <li>- be aware of body language, moods, silences, distress, and noticeable omissions</li> </ul>

Strategies for specific populations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- be specific about what you are asking fathers to do, and giving information about how to do it. For example, 'read to child 5-10 minutes per day' and 'some books you might like to try include...'. Modelling the behaviour with the child can also be helpful</li> <li>- allow for fathers' personal style of communication. This may be achieved by getting to know the father and learning what language and style of communication works best.</li> <li>- don't assume that you can or can't talk to a father about feelings; however, rephrasing to ask 'how does that sit with you/what do you think about that' may be more useful than asking directly about feelings</li> </ul>

### C.9 Strategies categorised as ***focus on empowering parents***

General strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- capitalise on family strengths</li> <li>- set goals that support family ownership</li> <li>- establish shared decision making</li> <li>- attempt to reduce parents' feelings of concern or mistrust (especially if the family has cultural or historical issues with government involvement)</li> </ul>
Specific strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- include parents in decisions</li> <li>- encourage parents to make choices between options provided by workers (or encourage them to come up with their own options);</li> <li>- encourage parents to take responsibility for seeking their own solutions, building incrementally on small successes</li> <li>- create concrete goals matched to family's needs</li> <li>- track progress and celebrate interim successes</li> <li>- assess family strengths that are useful relative to challenges that must be overcome</li> <li>- communicate clearly, explaining the process and the worker's role</li> <li>- listen</li> </ul>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- be aware of how body language, clothing, language, and use of tools, forms, and the physical environment affect engagement</li> <li>- recognise the effect of language, behaviour, and dress on the participation of clients from particular cultures</li> <li>- recognise and provide appropriate support for clients with disabilities and ensure appropriate aids so that clients have necessary information</li> <li>- arrange meetings in accessible locations and providing transport and mobility support if needed</li> <li>- keep personal information confidential.</li> <li>- Involve parents in case mapping conferences (part of the Signs of Safety framework)</li> <li>- take on the role of a 'constructive parent': achieved through modelling appropriate behaviour (especially with parents who are young, developmentally delayed or who did not receive effective parenting themselves).</li> <li>- Praise parents for improvements</li> </ul>
Strategies for specific populations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- attend to fathers' mental health needs</li> <li>- strengthen fathers' capacity to parent</li> <li>- identify fathers' nurturing strengths</li> </ul>

#### C.10 Strategies categorised as ***create a good first impression***

General strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- parents may be more likely to engage while in a period of crisis</li> </ul>
Specific strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- child protection workers should respond within 48 hours while the family is in immediate protection crisis</li> <li>- have contact weekly rather than monthly in initial stages</li> <li>- use facilitated referrals, known as a 'warm referral' in NSW, where the referring and referred to workers meet with the parent to introduce and pass on relevant information to other services</li> </ul>

Strategies for specific populations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- focus on the father's immediate environment and interests before dealing with perceived problems</li> <li>- consider how to include fathers at the beginning of a family's involvement with a program</li> <li>- make sure services offered by referred agencies are designed to engage fathers</li> </ul>

#### C.11 Strategies categorised as ***maintain a non-judgemental stance***

General strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- seek reasons for difficulties and understand the factors getting in the way of effective and appropriate parenting</li> </ul>
Specific strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- listen to parents</li> <li>- normalise their experiences</li> <li>- reframe questions so as not to blame</li> <li>- during visits with birth parents, respond to parents and their needs before those of the child (or reversing this order if the parents take that to mean that they are the "problem")</li> <li>- give time for parents to tell their story and express their emotions including anger and upset. Issues raised by parents or otherwise on the worker's agenda can be followed up later</li> <li>- keep immediate focus on what the child needs, rather than assigning blame</li> </ul>

#### C.12 Strategies categorised as ***provide sufficient time for engagement***

Specific strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- allow recruitment time, working closely with other services which provide referrals and information about clients</li> <li>- provide time for staff training and for making presentations and other personal contacts</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- let workers keep manageable caseloads</li> <li>- increase the amount of supervision available to caseworkers to compensate for increased expectations of workers</li> <li>- evaluate outcomes achieved, not throughput</li> </ul>
Strategies for specific populations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- engagement with fathers can take time, and a relationship may take many small interactions to achieve</li> </ul>

### C.13 Strategies categorised as ***streamline service provision***

Specific strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- avoid parents having to deal with multiple agencies and staff to get help</li> <li>- avoid referring parents to multiple different places and professionals, having to retell their story and re-establish relationships each time</li> <li>- one caseworker per family is ideal. That worker should prepare adequately before the first meeting, gathering as much information as possible from case notes, records, and by speaking with others within and outside the agency. Try to minimise the need for parents to retell their story.</li> </ul>

### C.14a Strategies categorised as ***adopt culturally appropriate practice - Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families***

General strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- be aware of cultural and historical factors that affect parents, such as negative past experiences with child protection, forced removal of children and other past trauma experiences and associated feelings of grief and loss.</li> <li>- acquire and foster understanding of the role of family, kin and community in Aboriginal communities</li> </ul>
Specific strategies

- workers should undertake Aboriginal cultural training and maintain their understanding through ongoing supervision and/or accessing additional training and expertise
- if a non-Aboriginal worker is working with an Aboriginal family, organise to have an Aboriginal worker accompany them
- consult with relevant Aboriginal workers, organisations, and community members
- understand the family network, including involving kin
- hold and demonstrate high expectations for success
- don't use the acronym ATSI to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; use the full term or consult local preferences
- understand the limits of your expertise: you have your own expertise to offer but Aboriginal families are experts in what it means to be an Aboriginal Australian
- network with Aboriginal workers and agencies
- understand that the concept of family in Aboriginal culture is broad, and that this has implications for decision-making processes within families
- address any ambivalence or anger the family has about your involvement with community services early—be thoughtful about initial contact. Readdress as your involvement with the family continues
- express genuine (but non-intrusive) inquisitiveness about family and culture
- use culturally appropriate resources
- be patient while overcoming mistrust, and respect and understand silence while families listen to and reflect on what is being said
- always give something back—time, resources, fun things for children
- never make promises or suggest outcomes that you cannot deliver
- remember names and relationships
- avoid too much direct eye contact; rely on local knowledge about what is appropriate

C.14b Strategies categorised as ***adopt culturally appropriate practice - Engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families***

Specific strategies

- recognise that communication and language services are central to successful engagement
- understand the specific values and cultural norms of the family and obtain cultural awareness training
- understand the impact of migration/settlement history and experience on the family and acknowledge that your presence may remind them of past experiences
- recognise diversity within cultural groups
- be aware of perceived and actual racism and discrimination experienced by the family or their cultural group
- make sure clients are clear about your role, your organisation's role, and how confidentiality works at your organisation (including when disclosure is required)
- don't assume that a client needs an interpreter, but provide an accredited (and possibly gender matched) interpreter if they do
- a person's proficiency with English (as an additional language) may deteriorate in stressful situations; workers speaking English with broken syntax is not the solution to overcoming language barriers
- get support from ethno-specific workers or organisations
- organisations should engage with community leaders and improve their own cultural competence via training and programs for supervisors and senior staff

#### C.14c Strategies categorised as ***engagement between birth parents and foster parents***

Specific strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- foster carers contact birth parents by phone prior to the first visit between parent and child, listening to the birth parent's story, responding to questions about the child, expressing eagerness to meet the birth parent, and generally reassuring and reinforcing that the carer's role in caring for the child is temporary while the birth parent's role as parent is permanent</li> <li>- foster carers accompany children on contact visits: this can help children relate more favourably to birth parents, and birth parents and foster cares can make and develop connections</li> </ul>

- when foster carers provide transportation to visits, it demonstrates their acceptance of the value of bringing the child to access visits and shows their approval of the birth parent.

#### C.14d Strategies categorised as ***engaging clients who are perpetrators of domestic and family violence***

General strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- build rapport and engagement without excusing or colluding with abusive behaviour</li> <li>- avoid engaging in debate, which risks endangering family members or workers</li> </ul>
Specific strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- maintain a non-judgemental stance and convey belief that people can change their behaviour</li> <li>- give the client space to tell their story, without giving the impression that you endorse the violence-supporting part of their narrative</li> <li>- show empathy and understanding of how the client's life experiences have shaped their views and expectations, but without excusing or colluding with the abusive behaviour</li> <li>- take the client's cultural identity into account, but don't make assumptions about the role of cultural identity in violence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o explore who in his community can support them to keep their family safe</li> <li>o identify aspects of culture that may affect their engagement with services and which may help them manage their emotions</li> <li>o offer the option for them to speak with someone older, younger, or of the same gender</li> <li>o offer to invite a cultural ally or advocate</li> </ul> </li> <li>- focus on the child's needs</li> <li>- identify positive reasons for changing and be able to recognise if client is ready to change</li> <li>- maintain engagement when referring to another service by explaining why you are referring, and the benefits and risks of referral to the client and their family</li> <li>- reflect on your own practice and keep up to date with knowledge in this field</li> </ul>

## Appendix D Barriers to engagement

Client Factors	Mistrust	Mistrust of the child protection system
		History of negative experiences with child protection authorities
		Mistrust towards workers
		A fear of losing their children permanently
		Aboriginal families may be intimidated by services because of past experiences, cultural differences and the connection to the history of the stolen generation. As well there may be a fear that their parenting will be perceived as 'not good enough' and could incur a range of consequences, including the removal of their children
		CALD families may be intimidated by services because of past experiences and/or cultural differences
	Practical difficulties	Cost, transport, child care, eligibility rules, program scheduling
		Personal factors related to mental and cognitive functioning of individual parents', confusion or fatigue (secondary to acquired brain injury, intellectual disability, mental health problems, side effects of medications)
	Socio-demographic factors	Poverty, single parenting, mental health issues, substance use, unemployment,
		Multiple and complex needs - unable to meet their children's basic needs for stable housing, food and clothing, or cannot pay the rent, inadequate housing
		Exposure to domestic violence
		CALD families may experience language barriers, citizenship and status barriers
	Attitude and relationship factors	Lack of confidence to attend services
		The stigma associated with labelling if attend services

		Not thinking the services will be useful
		Strained mother-father relationships
		For mothers living with or leaving domestic family violence there may be a feeling of threat or violence if seeking services
		CALD families may experience a fear of authority
	Father factors	Some men do not regard themselves as competent in child care and there is a tendency for men to be reticent about seeking or accepting help. Entrenched beliefs and perceptions relating to the roles of men and women, such as men not being 'natural nurturers' can enhance men's sense that child and family services are not meant for them.
		Child and family services are often seen as places devoted primarily to supporting women and their children and, as a result, men can be reluctant to seek help through these avenues. Entering the largely female domain can make fathers feel self-conscious or intimidated. Fathers may have concerns that parenting programs dictate how they should parent and may believe such groups are more suitable for mothers.
		Some fathers may feel that their perspective on parenting is not being acknowledged if they find themselves in a group that is overwhelmingly female, or if every service encounter is with female staff
		Men are less likely to seek out health workers, child welfare professionals and parent groups if they need support in their role as carer
		Fathers may have a distrust of the agency and/or caseworker. For fathers in difficult circumstances, a perception may exist that the system is not there to help them.
		For some fathers there may be a fear that involvement with the child welfare system will exacerbate their problems with the criminal justice system
		For some fathers there may be a fear that relationships with current partners not related to the child would be affected
		Some fathers may value the time they have alone



		In some cases, women may feel the centres are their domain and represent a safe place away from abusive partners, rendering them reluctant to welcome fathers into these groups
		Mothers may block access for both resident and non-resident fathers - mothers not identifying fathers to caseworkers when asked. The decision to conceal a father's identity may include reluctance about letting the father know that child welfare services are involved, fear that the father may gain custody, anger at the father for being in a new relationship or fear of the father's reaction, particularly if there has been a history of domestic abuse. It may also rest upon financial incentives, as the mother may receive more money informally from the father or assume she qualifies for more welfare benefits if his presence in the home is not known (financial disincentive). Additionally mothers may not want to include fathers if there has been a history of abuse or conflict between them or they may be unwilling to involve fathers in what they perceive to be 'their territory'.
		Lack of a valid address or working phone number for contact purposes
		Substance abuse, mental health issues
		Role conflict, fathers that haven't internalised the role of father
		Lack of adequate parenting skills, low parenting competence
Worker Factors	Individual factors	Individual caseworker bias
		Poor articulation of any expectations for involvement in family group conferences
		Lack of cultural competence. For CALD families there may be a cultural mismatch or lack of cultural understanding by the caseworker
		There may be worker safety concerns
	Perceptions of fathers	A tendency for professionals to adopt 'rigid' or 'fixed' thinking. For example, labelling fathers as 'bad fathers'. This may prevent workers from taking views expressed by 'bad fathers' seriously.
		Workers may experience difficulties in how to label those fathers who had successfully completed interventions. Workers may struggle to balance fathers' ability to change alongside past patterns of behaviour.

		Fathers identities may be constructed (as dangerous) by professionals in collaboration with the family without the professional having any direct contact with the man. Based upon this limited assessment, fathers may be excluded.
		There may be a diffusion of negative stories about fathers – men as absent, irrelevant, a threat and no use. Team members may re-inforce each others' positive or negative construction of male service users.
		Workers may focus on shortcomings and inadequacies of fathers
		Workers may have low expectations of non-resident father involvement
		Workers may not consider non-resident fathers for kinship care
		Traditional practices in relation to gender and parenting' may mean 'child welfare workers tend to focus on mothers and exclude or at least make little effort to include fathers'.
		Many birth fathers are not present in households where there are child welfare issues – practitioners do not always engage with fathers who are not living with their children.
Service Factors	Service Access	Location - the location of a service which can be a barrier for families who do not have private transport
		Lack of awareness of services or eligibility for services
		Services may be intimidating or threatening to some families
		There may be too many pathways to get help – too many people to see before you get to the one you need
		The eligibility criteria may be too narrow
	Service culture	Agency culture
		There may be issues selecting an interpreter for CALD families
		With regards to fathers: - working hours can be an obstacle to accessing services

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- they might not know where to look for help</li> <li>- some women clients may find the inclusion of men unsettling</li> </ul>
Contextual factors	Social and policy environment	Child welfare operates in a 'law enforcement and judicial environment'. The primary role of child protection is to investigate whether there has been abuse or neglect, which are criminal acts, making parents perpetrators and children victims. Law enforcement and forensics may be involved. These roles and requirements may not align with an approach that needs to be oriented toward family strengths and engagement.
		Policies, child protection partners, structures and process tend to be deficit oriented
		Social exclusion/stigma: internalised shame arising from behaviours that are not socially sanctioned may prevent parents engaging with services; it can also contribute to parents feeling that asking for help puts their child at risk of removal.
		Power differentials between parent and practitioner - 'Workers are powerful and families are not. Workers can cause children to be removed, reunification to be denied and even when the family is complying with their plan, persuade the court to add new expectations'.

