

Leading support for

Relationships
AUSTRALIA • QLD



The Future of Family Needs

What helplines are seeing first

Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference 2026

Find a way[⁂]



Acknowledgement of Country

Relationships Australia Queensland acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their spiritual, physical, emotional, mental, and economic connection to the Land and Seas.

The contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has shaped our knowledge of the Country and our identity. All Australians benefit from their generosity in sharing the Country and their culture. We maintain their right to utilise culture as a protective factor that supports families and embrace their right to contribute to service solutions.

Artwork : Healing Spirits by BindiLee

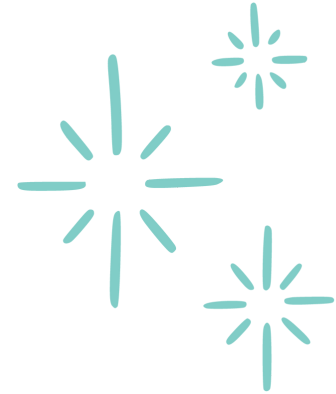


Agenda

- **Introductions** - RAQ and Virtual Services
- **The value of helpline insight** – understanding community themes in real time
- **Emerging trends** – what clients are experiencing and how they are navigating support systems
- **From insight to action** – identifying gaps that services and systems can respond to



Relationships Australia QLD



Our values



Hope

We believe in our clients and their capacity for change. Together, we will find a way through difficult times.



Inclusion

We embrace diversity, listen carefully, and treat everyone with respect, kindness, and dignity.



Connection

We know that connected communities are safer communities and that healthy relationships - with ourselves and each other - lead to positive outcomes for all.



Courage

We are willing to make difficult decisions that lead to positive change. We speak up on the issues that matter.

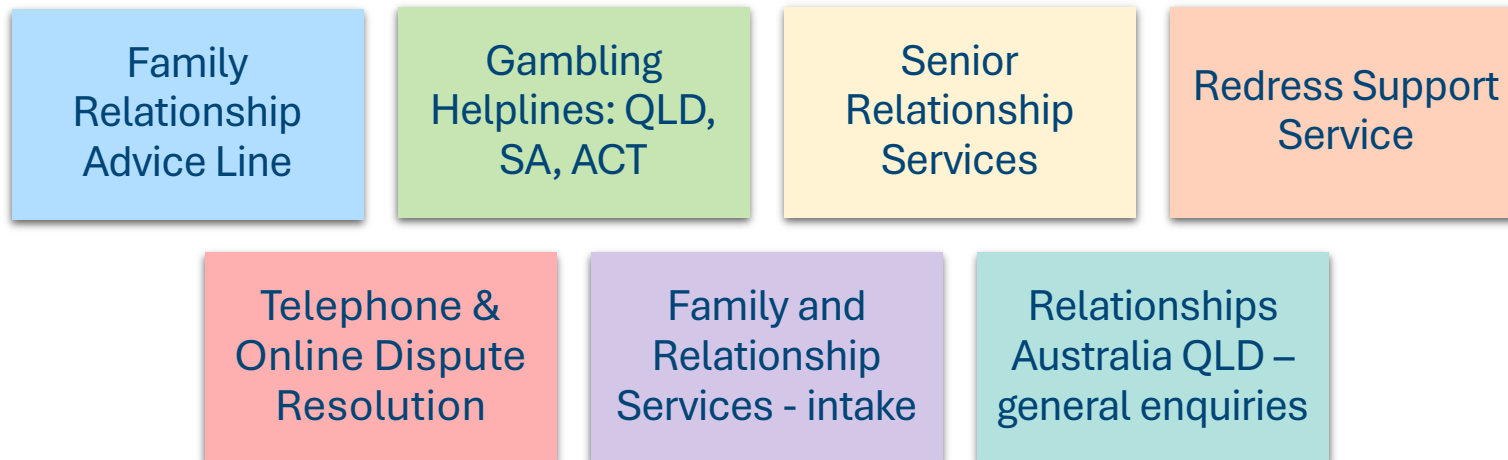
We are here to help people build and sustain healthy relationships by providing the **knowledge and skills** needed to feel safe and connected

We advocate for better relationship wellbeing because we know the **health of our relationships determines the health of our communities**

What do we do at Virtual Services

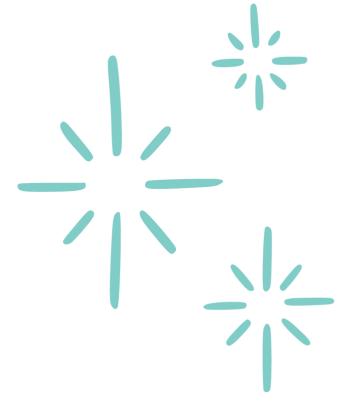


- From our contact centre of +100 staff based in Brisbane, we operate 6 inbound helplines and 3 outbound services
- Services are state based or national
- We support over 120, 000 clients each year



Insight of helplines

- Everyone is experiencing profound shifts in **economical, technological, and societal pressures**
- As these pressures evolve, the **challenges and needs of the community changes**, and so does the **type of help** they are looking for
- **Helplines see these needs change in real time**

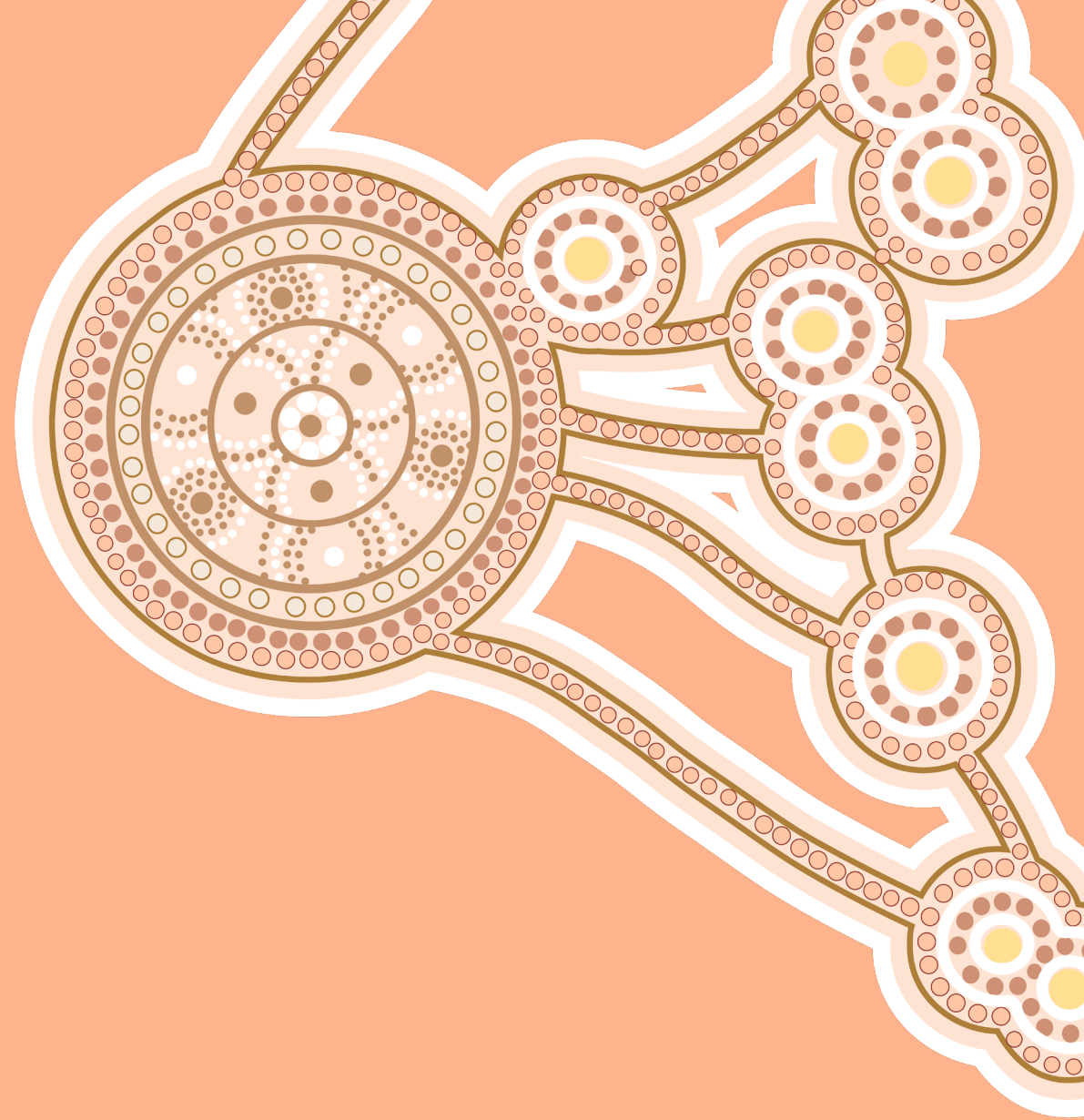




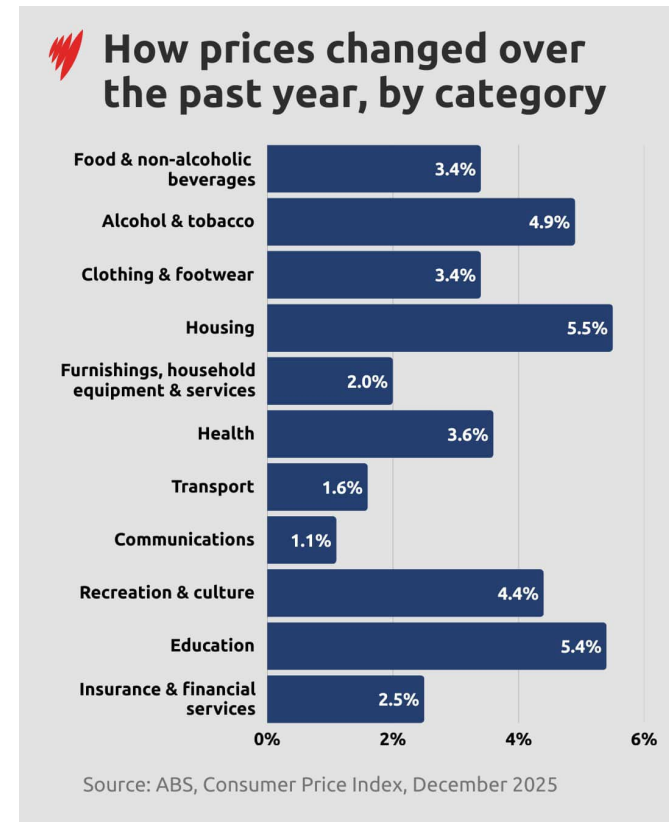
5 to 15+ year delay for new knowledge to be incorporated into practice & service design

Morris & colleagues (2011). The answer is 17 years, what is the question: understanding time lags in translational research.

Emerging trends from the frontline

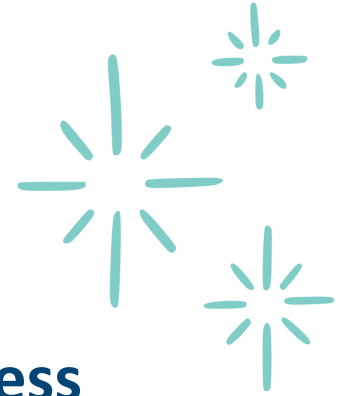


Cost of living pressures & housing insecurity



Koster, A. (2026). 'Impossible choices': The data that proves living costs are rising for Australians. SBS News.

Service users can be vulnerable to falling through the cracks



- Housing services often prioritise those at risk of **homelessness**
 - Lack of capacity to **case manage** separated families with assets to find stable housing options
- Centrelink family support payments **less accessible** for those in financial stress but have assets locked in property settlement
- Access to services limited (e.g. Legal Aid - due to assets)

Case study

Jodie has recently separated from her husband but remains living with him under the same roof. She had hoped he would leave so she could remain in the family home as the primary caregiver for their two children (aged 6 & 8 yrs). However, he has said he intends to stay.

Jodie works 4 days a week and cannot afford a rental. She has no family living locally and feels unable to ask friends to accommodate her and the kids. She has family interstate but feels legally barred to relocate as her husband would never agree. She does not qualify for DFV refuge or social housing support.

The home environment is tense, and the children witness the parental conflict & see Jodie crying. Jodie wants to move on, but housing & financial constraints prevent this.



Difficulties with accessing the right support at the right time



- Clients struggling to obtain and maintain **access to timely, affordable supports** (e.g., therapy, legal, mediation, parenting programs)
 - Decline in free services | Long wait times
 - Clients with multiple presenting needs may be "too complex" for government funded services, or require multiple services
- Many clients impacted by **chronic, low-moderate DFV** do not receive appropriate support
 - Services funded primarily for crisis or brief intervention



**2 in 5
respondents**

in 2021 did not know where to access help for a domestic violence issue

Increasing complexity and emotional distress in presentations



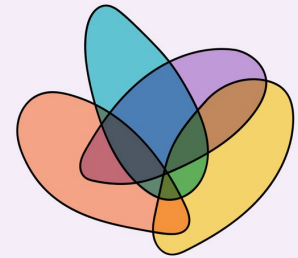
— Increasing **complexity in presentations** due to **intersectional needs and risks** (DSS, 2025)

- E.g., family law + mental health + neurodivergence + child safety

— **Global stressors** are amplifying **personal distress**

- E.g., War, rising cost of living, societal changes

— Clients are reliant on **brief intervention services** (e.g., helplines) to navigate complex issues as accessibility of private services becomes more difficult



Case study

Andrea has repeatedly contacted FRAL about her children's psychological safety. She has an acquired brain injury and PTSD related to family violence, no NDIS supports, and memory difficulties affecting recall of previous calls and legal advice received.

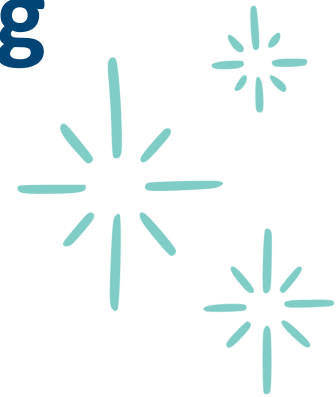
Her children are in their father's care, and a Protection Order is in place against her. Since 2025, she has self-represented in complex Family Court proceedings involving family violence orders and is on the high-risk Evatt List.

Although unemployed, Andrea is ineligible for legal aid because she owns a home. She cannot afford private legal representation, and community legal centres consider her matter too complex for their general scope.

FRAL cannot provide case management or document assistance.



Service users can be vulnerable to falling through the cracks



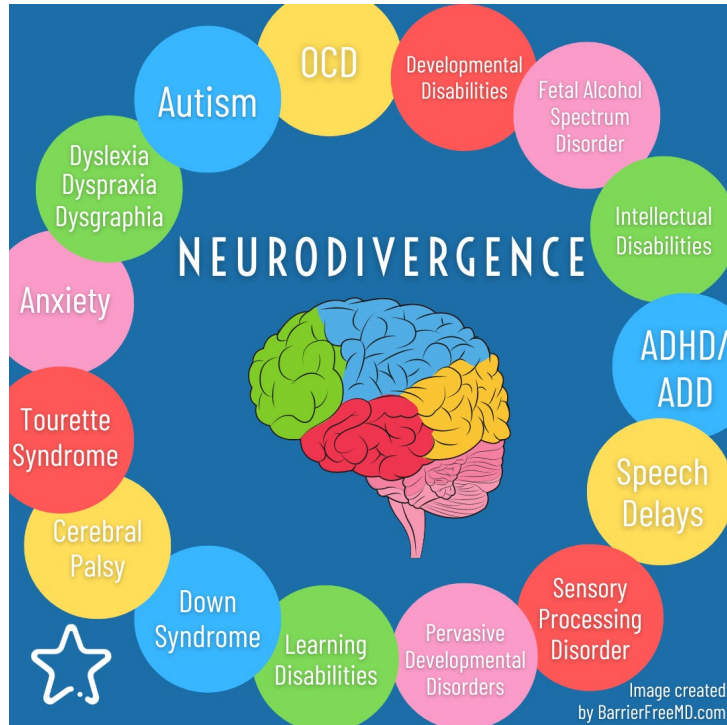
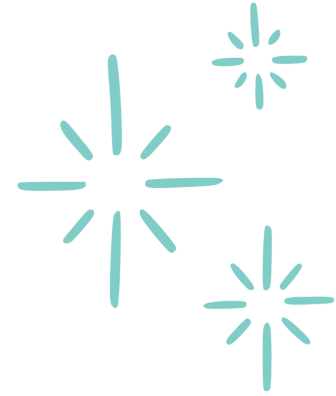
- Service **specialisation** struggles to meet the **intersectionality** of client's presenting issues, needs, and risks
 - Clients are needing to navigate complex systems on their own
 - Repeated story telling and re-traumatisation
- Clients would benefit from more **case management support & practical assistance** with navigating systems
 - e.g., facilitated referrals, information sharing between services, collaboration on support plans
- **Wait times and costs** for services are **extending periods of stress and uncertainty** and leading clients to self-manage difficult or unsafe situations

*“Direct or linear approaches are likely to **fail to meet policy objectives** because they cannot recognise or respond to cope with the **multi-factorial and multi-directional facets of family separation**, including child development and adult emotional and psychosocial needs”*

Relationships Australia National's submission to the 2024 review of Family Relationship Services.

Metcalf (2024). *Support for separating families: Review of the Family Relationships Services Program*

Growing challenges in co-parenting children with additional needs



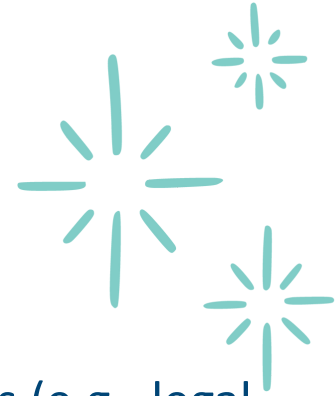
Emerging needs for children & young people

- Neurodivergence, ADHD, Autism
 - *Autism diagnoses increased from 3.2% in 2018 to 4.3% in 2022 (ABS, 2022)*
 - *ADHD & other behavioural/cognitive issues increased from 7.2% to 17.3% (ABS, 2022)*
- Gender identity
- Trauma from exposure to DFV and neglect

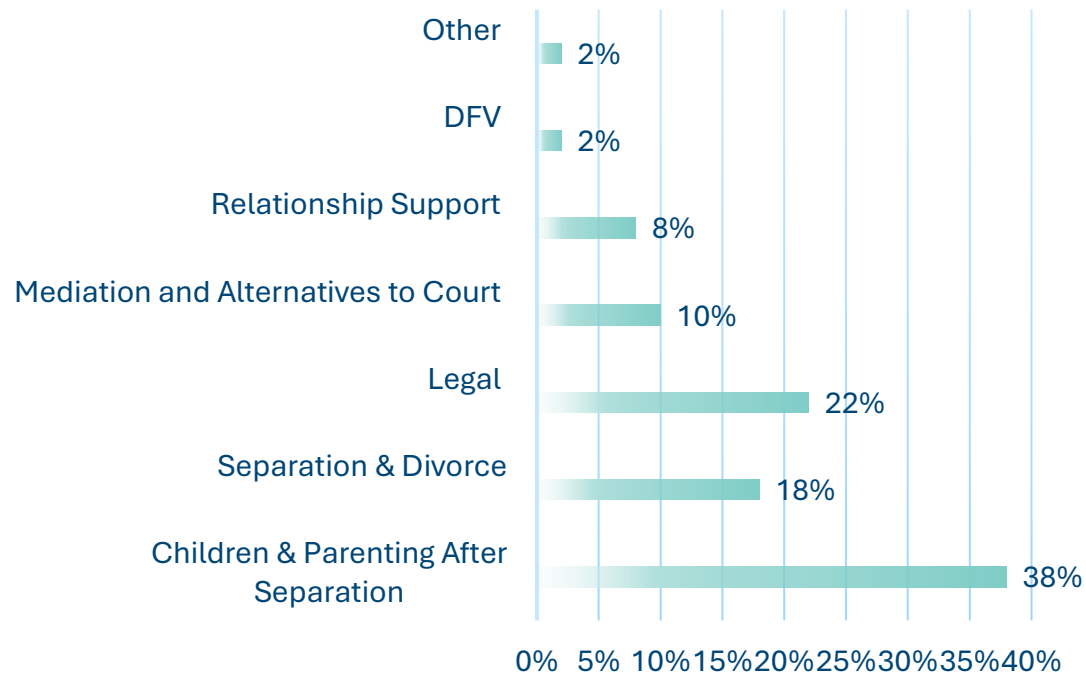
Co-parenting challenges

- Behaviour management, medication use, therapy access
- Different parenting styles and world views = lack of continuity of care for the child

Mediation demand is surging, driven by limited alternatives



PRESENTING ISSUES TO FRAL - PERCENTAGE OF CALLS



- Limited access to services (e.g., legal advice, parenting support) is resulting in **informal arrangements**
 - Frequently break down, confusing about rights and responsibilities, lead to disputes and conflict
- Mediation is one of the **most common referrals** we provide

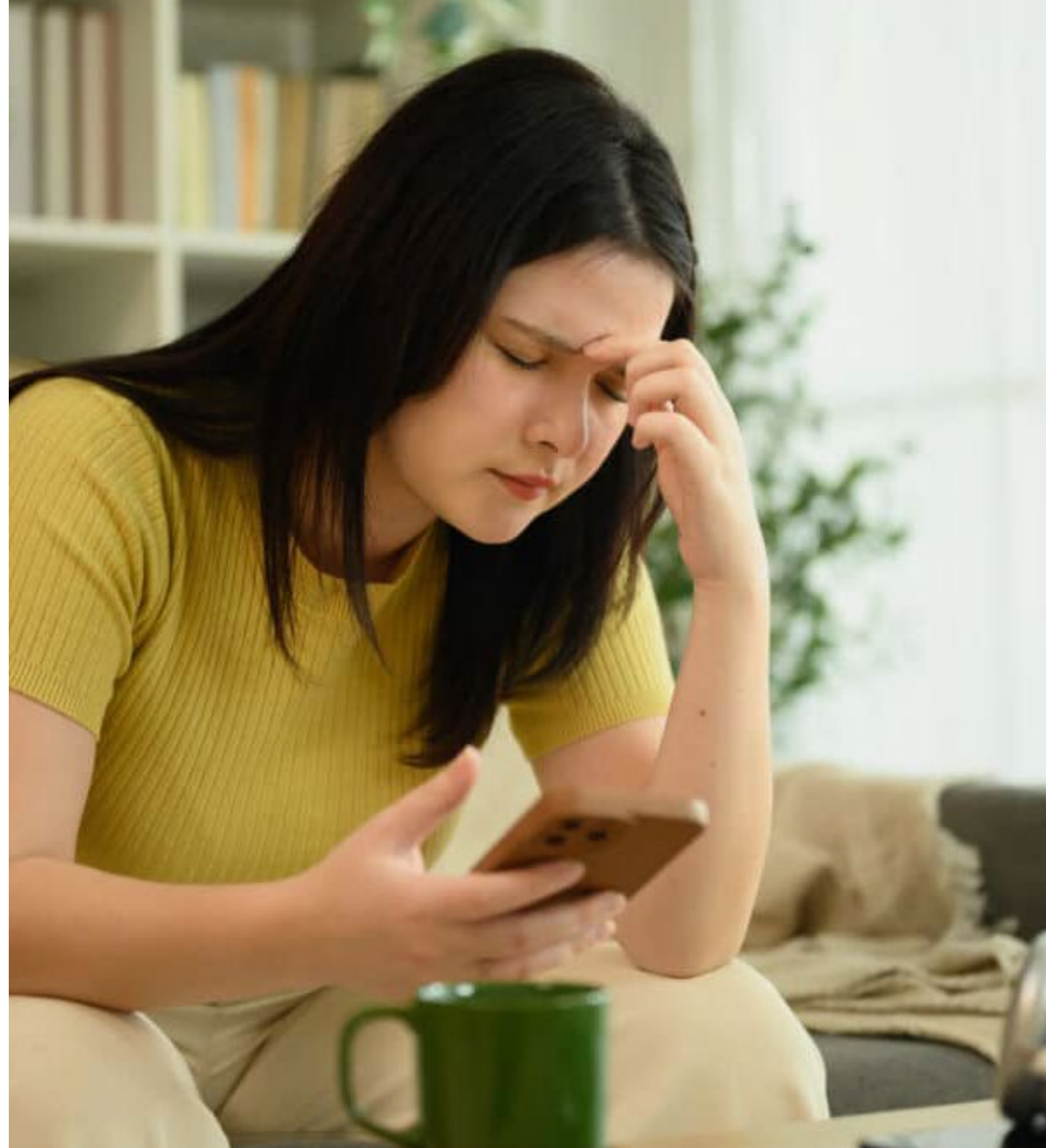
Case study

Sarah is seeking support regarding a parenting conflict about her 8-year-old daughter, Sienna. Sienna has autism and requires consistent routines and medication.

The current parenting order outlines that Sienna will spend every second weekend with her father, Tony.

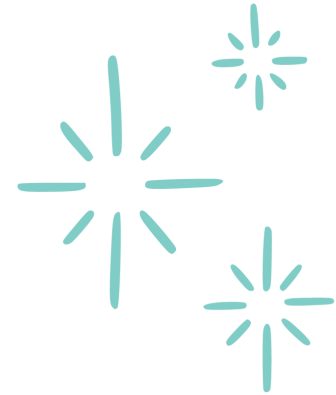
Sarah reports Tony disagrees with Sienna's diagnosis and need for medication, which he does not administer.

Sienna has been returning to Sarah's care increasingly distressed. Due to DFV history with Tony, Sarah is uncomfortable to return to mediation, and she's tried it before and unsuccessful, and reluctant to return to court due to financial reasons.

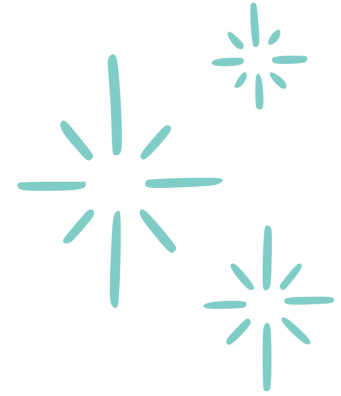


Service delivery opportunities

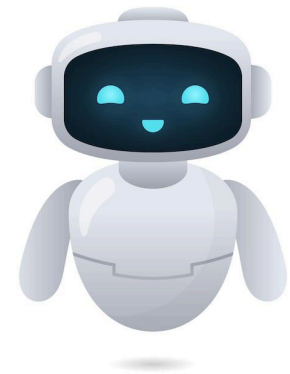
- Mediation is not meeting the needs of **high conflict coparents**
 - Mediation > family court > dispute > mediation
 - **Skill building and addressing underlying dynamics contributing to recurrent conflict**
 - Elements of **parenting co-ordination** could be incorporated to meet these possible service gaps (Huerta & colleagues, 2025)



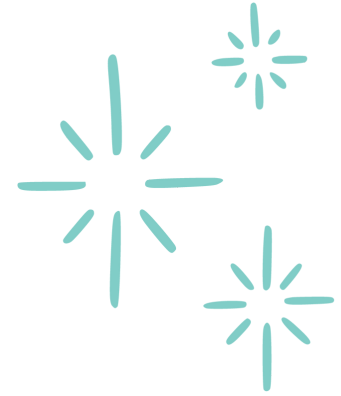
AI and the online environment



- Emerging cases where clients are reporting:
 - **Relationship distress** and **feelings of “infidelity”** where their partner has formed an emotional/ romantic connection with AI (Li & Zhang, 2024; Phang et al., 2025)
 - Using AI as a form of emotional regulation when distressed (Franz et al., 2026)
- 54% of children had used AI assistants for **personal or social reasons** (Esafety Commissioner, 2026)
- Accessing AI for information - Privacy risks & misinformation
 - E.g., AI can provide incorrect Australian law information, fabricated cases/citation misleading information (Qld Courts, 2026)



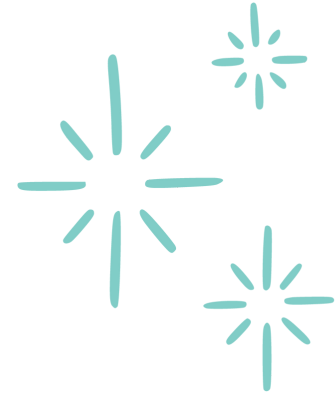
AI and the online environment



Opportunities for service enhancement

- AI tools could help people navigate complex systems by providing tailored information, responding to questions, and providing resources (e.g., family law, mental health)
 - Quality controlled
 - Privacy
 - Built for purpose
- Opportunity for practitioners to build their skills about responding to and supporting AI harms experienced by clients
- Exploring AI use in **intake screening**

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