

How services support families to build their village

Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference

9 September 2026

Uniting



We acknowledge Australia's First Peoples as the original and ongoing custodians of the lands and waters on which we live and work.

We recognise the continuing sovereignty of First Peoples in NSW and the ACT, and their absolute right to self-determination.

We act on our responsibility to co-create a national dialogue of truth that proudly embraces First Peoples' history, culture, and rights, for present and future generations.

We pay our respects to all Elders – past and present – and to all First Peoples and communities.

About the Uniting Families Report

A 10-year partnership project exploring family life in Australia

Why families?

The family is a fundamental social institution, with important roles to play in the process of raising children, and in addressing (and reproducing) entrenched disadvantage.

Political discourse, social policy, and social service design have tended to ignore the complexity and diversity of families. This happens in ways that perpetuate disadvantage for the most vulnerable members of our society.

We want to contribute to changing this.

Each edition of the report focuses on a specific aspect of the lives of families raising children, and:

- celebrates the diversity of family in Australia.
- explores how families raise children and how these practises vary across family type.
- analyses the resources, opportunities and supports families have as they carry out this role.



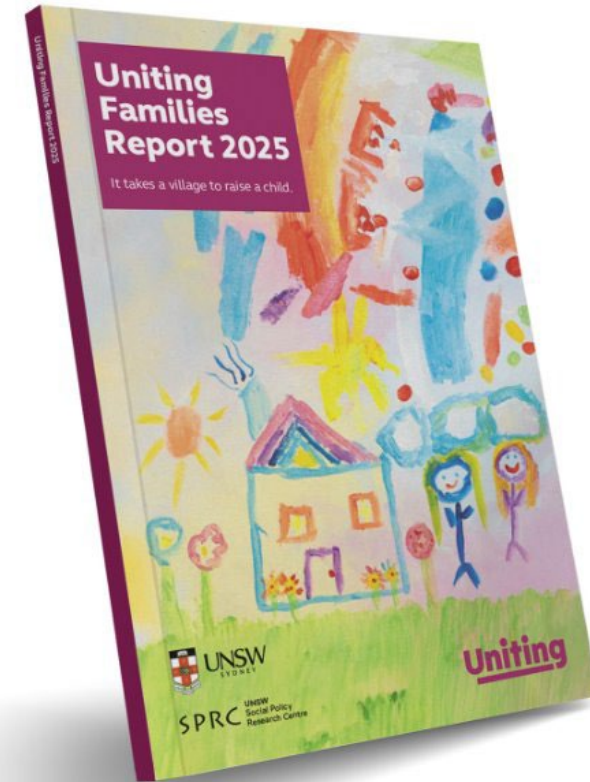
About the 2025 report

‘It takes a village to raise a child’

The Uniting Families Report ‘It takes a village to raise a child’ examines the role that social supports play in the lives of families raising children.

It uses a sequential multi-methods approach, combining interviews with parents and carers and analysis of the 2023 HILDA dataset, to explore how families participate in networks of formal services and informal relationships.

It finds that, particularly for families facing social and structural disadvantage, some community services have an important role to play as a location in which families find and grow their village.



The village has a complex relationship with services

What the researchers heard from interviews with families

The village is a relational ecosystem; a place of social capital.

People value diverse villages including extended family, friends, and others in their local community at the same stage of life.

Villages usually grow and evolve organically. They're built on mutual recognition, on trust, on care and reciprocity.

People value services but don't generally see them as part of the village.

People value services like GPs and disability supports and early learning services and sometimes even child protection caseworkers.

Sometimes people working in those services can become part of the village, when they play an important and an ongoing role in people's lives

Some kinds of services can help families to build and sustain their own villages.

Schools, playgroups and community centres are not simply service providers.

They are often places of connection, where families feel known, where they feel safe, where they feel part of something larger.

Social policy does not adequately recognise this

What we as service providers see when we apply this to the system we work in

Some social policies explicitly recognise the village as useful.

It's a way of ensuring vulnerable families find the supports they need; they're a means to an end.

For example, the Commonwealth Government's thriving Kids reforms emphasise providing supports for eligible families in the places that they already go.

Supporting families to grow villages is generally not a high priority.

It happens in local community spaces where people raising children gather with others at a similar stage of life: playgroups, libraries, etc.

These kinds of services are often under-funded, and vulnerable to cuts when times are tight.

Individualised funding models make it hard for services to strengthen villages.

These models increase choice and provide fine-grained accountability.

But they encourage short-term interactions focused on specific problems.

Village-building is holistic, relational, and requires patience.

Early Help – Working in partnership

Co-locating evidence-based family support in universal services

Natalie Worthington | Angela Hoy

The challenge

- Parents are feeling less supported and lack 'a village'
- Services are siloed and fragmented
- Poor communication between services
- Schools, Kinders and MCHN are often unaware of available supports for families in the community
- Parents who need early support don't meet the threshold for family services
- Stigma prevents parents from seeking help

"Mary reported that she had never accessed services before and was quite embarrassed that she was in her current situation."

Context: Why early intervention?



**Improving parenting skills
reduce risk**



**Universal approach
reduces stigma**



**Early support
improves outcomes**

What is the Early Help program?



Age range: 0–12 years | **Coverage:** Outer & inner eastern metropolitan Melbourne | **Operating since:** July 2022

What we deliver

Individual support

- ✓ Short-term case management (1–6 sessions)
- ✓ Parenting coaching and skill-building
- ✓ Service navigation and referral coordination
- ✓ Small brokerage to meet family goals
- ✓ Delivered in-home, at the service, or online

Evidence-based group programs

- ✓ Tuning in to Kids (TIK) – emotional coaching
- ✓ TIK for Dads – father-specific adaptation
- ✓ Tuning in to Teens (TinT)
- ✓ Circle of Security – attachment-based
- ✓ Bringing Up Great Kids
- ✓ Treehouse – children’s social skills & anxiety

Parent surveys drive what we offer – Tuning in to Toddlers being added in response to identified need from MCHN

Case study: filling the gap

Maria, John, Ben (7) & Beth (5) – Referred by partner primary school

Presenting issues

- Beth's school attendance was very low
- Poor grooming and self-care when she did attend
- Beth had sensory issues making mornings extremely difficult
- Ben (older sibling) attending special school with ADHD, ASD, cerebral palsy
- Maria overwhelmed managing complex needs alone; husband working long hours

Early Help interventions

- Referral to Family Services (Specialist Disability Program)
- Paediatrician referral for Beth's sensory assessment
- Parenting support: boundaries and routines
- NDIS Support Coordination established for Ben
- Meeting facilitated between Maria and school
- Specialist hairdresser funded via brokerage

Case study outcomes

Beth

Attending school every day. Gets upset when she misses a day. Established rapport with teacher and peers.

Maria

Feeling less overwhelmed. Confident to contact school. Successful morning and afternoon routines implemented. IFS and NDIS support ongoing.

Ben

NDIS plan now managed by professional support coordinator – reducing demand on Maria and ensuring he gets the most from his plan.

School

Reported that prior to Early Help they would have referred to Child Protection due to attendance and presentation – they had no other means of offering support.

Qualitative data: What parents tell us

Better mental health

Parents consistently report improved emotional wellbeing and reduced feelings of overwhelm

More confident

Increased self-efficacy – parents feel capable and empowered to manage parenting challenges

More parenting insight and knowledge

Practical skills and understanding of child development that translate into daily life

Feeling 'much better' as a parent

Holistic improvement in parenting identity and confidence in providing safe, nurturing environments

Early, accessible, evidence-informed support
strengthens families,
reduces risk and empowers parents.

When we do it together, we do it better.

The Cabramatta Multicultural Centre

Insights from the front line of Sydney



The Cabramatta Multicultural Centre

Where it is

Cabramatta; a suburb in the Fairfield LGA in Western Sydney.

A very multicultural area. At the 2021 Census:

- over two thirds of residents born outside Australia
- one eighth spoke only English at home.
- Large Vietnamese and Chinese communities; significant minorities from other South-East Asian countries.

What it does

Runs free supported playgroups, school readiness programs, and parenting support services for families.

Our team speaks a range of local community languages and provide culturally appropriate information and support for family wellbeing.

Why it matters

Illuminates village-building among first-generation migrants, especially refugees.

Need is high. Families are often isolated: they do not know where support is available, may lack local social networks, and may feel inhibited by language barriers or unfamiliar systems.

Insights from our team on the ground

What it feels like to build villages

Families engage when they feel safe, known and accepted.

Fund relationship-based practice and allow time for trust-building.

Peer support is a major mechanism of change.

Advice from other parents can carry more weight than professional advice.

Design programs to intentionally create peer connection and leadership.

Trust is fragile.

Negative experiences with one service can reduce willingness to engage with others.

Measure service quality through family experience, not just referral throughput.

Practical support is valuable and a chance to build trust

Public transport, excursions and everyday system navigation expand families' physical and social villages.

Build practical participation supports into family programs, including transport.



Official

Thank you

Access the Uniting Families Report at:

www.uniting.org/families-report



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