

CHAPTER 1

Building interagency collaboration

1.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION

One of the primary concerns of any community must be the safety health and wellbeing of its children and young persons. This responsibility goes beyond the role of a single government department, and requires the commitment of all levels of government, non-government agencies and the wider community to deliver a coordinated and comprehensive system for protecting children and young people.

The Department of Community Services has the 'lead responsibility' in providing care and protection for children and young people in NSW but there are many other agencies, both within and beyond government, that have a vital role to play. No single agency, service, program or professional discipline has the knowledge, skill or mandate for the entire spectrum of interventions to protect children from harm.

The efficacy of the NSW child and family service system relies on the response of individual agencies and professionals working in collaboration with others in the service system, regardless of differences in size, individual philosophies, structures or funding sources.

1.2 INTERAGENCY PRACTICE IN CHILD PROTECTION

The *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*¹ (the Act) provides the framework for promoting a partnership approach to child protection. The legislation recognises that responsibility is shared across:

- ▶ government agencies
- ▶ non-government agencies
- ▶ families
- ▶ corporations
- ▶ business agencies
- ▶ the community.

The principles contained in Sections 9 and 10 of the Act guide government and non-government agencies in exercising their responsibilities under the Act, and in relating with each other and with children and young people at risk of harm.

Sections 11 to 14 of the Act contain important additional principles for government and non-government agencies in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, their families and communities.

REFER Appendix 1 for the legislative principles outlined in Sections 9 and 10 of the Act, and Appendix 6 for the additional principles related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The foundation for interagency practice is the mandatory reporting framework provided by Section 27 of the Act. Mandatory reporting places an obligation on a range of professionals who work with children to report concerns of risk of harm. These professionals form the network of practitioners engaged in working together under the *NSW Interagency Guidelines for Child Protection Intervention*.

¹The legislation is available online: <http://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au>

The Act also requires the Director-General of the Department of Community Services to promote the development of coordinated strategies for the care and protection of children and young people. Such strategies include the provision of assessment and support services directed towards strengthening families to look after children and young people so that their safety and welfare is not put at risk.

Interagency practice refers to the process of agencies working together to achieve joint outcomes for children, young people and their families, and problem-solving together to improve child protection service responses. It can include improving communication, sharing of information about services, case planning for specific children and their families, and informal approaches to quickly resolve immediate problems for children at risk.

REFER Chapter 6, 'Best practice principles in working with children and families', for information on engaging families, referral practice and exchanging information about children, young people and families.

Interagency practice in child protection happens on three levels:

- ▶ **policy level** – where agencies at all levels of government (state, federal and local) work together with non-government stakeholders to establish clear goals and objectives for the prevention of harm to children. Policy can be delivered through legislative change, the development of statements and principles that set out the responsibilities and actions of all stakeholders, and guidelines to apply those statements and principles in practice
- ▶ **program level** – where service delivery is managed by more than one agency, with each of the participating agencies bringing their expertise and skills so that clients receive a coordinated and integrated service response without the need to move between agencies and programs. Joint Investigation Response Teams (JIRTs) are an example of interagency practice through cross-agency programs. They link the risk assessment and protective interventions of the Department of Community Services with criminal investigations conducted by NSW Police and medical examination, counselling and therapeutic services from NSW Health
- ▶ **direct service level** – where agencies work together to address the needs of individual children, young people and families through shared case planning, management and coordination efforts. The practice of interagency case management to build a common case plan and goal improves the quality of the service outcomes received by the child, young person and family, and are an example of interagency practice at the direct service level.

When interagency practice and collaboration is working well, children, young people and their families, human service workers and agencies all benefit:

Table 1. 1: Benefits of interagency practice

For clients	For workers	For agencies
A coordinated case plan can address a range of needs and provide more seamless service delivery	Sharing information, assessment knowledge and intervention responsibility is less stressful and more rewarding than acting individually	Reduces duplication of services and allows for greater efficiency in the utilisation of public resources
Cooperative efforts by agencies improves access to services	The quality of problem-solving and service planning is enhanced when all parties coordinate their efforts	Can assist in easing workforce limitations and barriers created by agency mandates
More diverse expertise is available due to the joined up resources of agencies	Increased contact and better relationships between service providers improves communication and role clarity, and eases the stress of individual work with clients in crisis	Improves the likelihood of meeting the varied and complex needs of clients
Models cooperation to clients, and exposes effective methods of problem-solving and relating to other professionals	Breaks down defensive ways of thinking, and reduces the undue responsibility or blame on any one worker or agency	Produces a wider picture of the needs of a community, and can lead to shared planning across a range of agencies

1.3 STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION

At the broadest level, collaboration needs to become an integral component of the core business of all agencies. The NSW Human Services Chief Executive Officers have confirmed the following collaboration principles for human services agencies across government:

- ▶ organisational cultures must value innovative solutions to complex client and community needs, and respect the different perspectives of other agencies and professionals
- ▶ relationships between people are at the centre of collaboration, recognising that it takes time and effort to develop trust, a common language and a common understanding of each agency's requirements
- ▶ frank and respectful analysis of many different perspectives and priorities is essential so that creative, innovative and transparent solutions can be developed to resolve mutual problems.

Some of the specific ways in which agencies can improve the way that they work together include:

- ▶ **Building better local networks** which foster an understanding of the agencies that are operating in the local area. Getting to know the types of services they offer and the expertise of their workforce could be achieved by establishing a program of interagency network meetings, or information bulletins to share information; identify interagency issues early; and to gain a better understanding of roles and responsibilities
- ▶ **Agreeing on better ways to work together to support shared clients** might involve establishing a formal or informal network of service providers in a local area and actively undertaking joint case planning, case conferencing, or cross-agency referrals. These types of activities help providers to consider information about a child or a family from their respective professional disciplines, and to work out the best mix of supports for those clients
- ▶ **Establishing formal protocols** to ensure that the roles and responsibilities of all parties are clear in supporting children and families in the local community by using Memoranda of Understanding to establish the basis for interagency collaboration where the interdependencies between agencies are accounted for and facilitated. Protocols can provide guidance for workers to engage with one another across agency and program boundaries
- ▶ **Creating opportunities for shared training** which provide a strong foundation for interagency practice would improve understanding of agencies' respective roles and responsibilities, as well as promoting a shared language, knowledge and awareness between agencies
- ▶ **Recognising the function of strengthening relationships** between agency partners within 'position descriptions'. For instance, the Department of Community Services requires that Managers in Community Services Centres establish and facilitate collaborative and innovative partnerships with community partners towards an integration of service delivery at the local level. In addition, there is an expectation of their active participation in local interagency forums where the aim is to share an understanding of child protection service provision, and the respective roles of local agencies.

REFER Chapter 3.2 for a diagram on the interagency approach in child protection practice.

1.4 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF KEY AGENCIES IN CHILD PROTECTION

Effective collaboration requires agencies to be familiar with each other's roles and responsibilities as this will support good communication and the ability to identify opportunities for 'joined up' approaches to resolving issues faced by families with children and young people.

The roles and responsibilities of agencies with the most direct involvement in the protection of children and young people are outlined in Table 1.2. These include NSW Government human service and justice agencies, NSW Government independent oversight and support agencies and non-government organisations, including non-government schools and local government.

REFER Appendix 2 provides details of all agencies' responsibilities, their services and programs relevant to child protection.

Table 1.2: Key roles and responsibilities in child protection (1/3)

Who	What
NSW Government human service and justice agencies	
Department of Community Services (DoCS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ has lead responsibility for providing and coordinating the community response to care and protect children and young people ▶ accepts and assesses reports about children and young people who are at risk of harm ▶ jointly investigates serious reports about child sexual or physical abuse or extreme neglect with other agencies, such as NSW Police or Joint Investigation Response Teams (JIRTs) ▶ supports and monitors children, young people and families at risk ▶ initiates care proceedings before the Children's Court ▶ facilitates out-of-home care arrangements for children and young people ▶ delivers community awareness, education and preventative programs about the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people
NSW Police	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ has a key role in recognising and reporting children and young people who are suspected of being at risk of harm ▶ undertakes joint investigation with other agencies on reports that may be subject to criminal charges, such as child sexual abuse and serious child physical abuse, as defined in the JIRT policy and procedures manual, or extreme neglect ▶ intervenes in child abuse and neglect cases, applying for Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs), laying criminal charges and commencing criminal proceedings as needed ▶ refers children and young people to emergency interim placements following accidents and disasters where the parent/carer has been hospitalised, arrested or has died ▶ delivers crime prevention programs aimed at identifying and diverting children and young people at risk of becoming young offenders
NSW Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ has a key role in recognising and reporting children and young people who are suspected of being at risk of harm ▶ Conducts medical examinations and assessments, and provides medical treatment, crisis and ongoing counselling, and advocacy services for children and young people who have been, or are suspected of having been, physically or sexually abused or neglected ▶ Provides crisis and ongoing counselling for children under the age of 10 who are exhibiting sexualised or sexually abusive behaviour, and treatment programs for adult intra-familial child sex offenders ▶ Delivers preventative programs and early intervention services that aim to protect children and young people ▶ prepares and supports children and young people who have to go to court, where their abuse is the subject of criminal proceedings

Table 1.2: Key roles and responsibilities in child protection (2/3)

Who	What
NSW Government human service and justice agencies	
Department of Education and Training (DET)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ has a key role in recognising and reporting children and young people who are suspected of being at risk of harm ▶ informs children and young people who are students, apprentices and trainees in their schools, colleges, workplaces and programs about their right to be protected from abuse, and where they can get support ▶ provides child protection education to children and young people in schools, and teaches protective strategies to children in preschools and child care centres
Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ reports children and young people suspected of being at risk of harm ▶ provides a safe environment for children and young people with whom they are working ▶ provides the opportunity for young offenders and their victims (including young people who are victims of assault) to meet together in a safe and supported environment when referred to a youth justice conference ▶ provides offence-related services to children and young people in custody, conditional release or community orders. These children and young people may be victims as well as offenders against children ▶ provides assessment, case planning and interventions for young offenders in custody or under community orders, including for those who have committed sex or violent offences against children ▶ informs registered victims of impending parole hearings and seeks their submissions for these hearings
Department of Corrective Services (DCS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ ensures that inmates who are under 18 years of age are safe from harm ▶ assesses risk, develops case management plans, and provides interventions that reduce the risk of known child-related offenders reoffending ▶ assesses the risk for known child-related offenders to receive visits from children or young people while they are in custody, or if the offenders want to participate in external leave programs ▶ assesses the risk for offenders to have their child reside with them in custody or participate in occasional care programs
Department of Housing (DoH)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ reports children and young people suspected of being at risk of harm ▶ provides housing assistance to young people in transition from out-of-home care to independent living
Attorney General's Department (AGD)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ provides a safe place for children and young people waiting at court ▶ ensures the availability of the relevant technology and facilities for children to give evidence ▶ minimises delays for children waiting to give evidence by expediting hearings, giving matters involving children priority, and ensuring children are not kept waiting at court to give evidence longer than necessary
Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ finalises charges in conjunction with NSW Police for the prosecution of alleged child-related offenders ▶ advises investigators on the sufficiency of evidence and the appropriateness of particular charges relating to child-related offenders ▶ prosecutes all criminal proceedings for child sexual assault offences ▶ supports children who are victims and witnesses, before and during court appearances
Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (DADHC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ reports children and young people suspected of being at risk of harm ▶ provides specialist supports to young people with a disability in transition from out-of-home care to independent living
NSW Sport and Recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ reports children and young people suspected of being at risk of harm ▶ educates coaches, administrators, parents and children about child protection electronically: http://www.playbytherules.net.au

Table 1.2: Key roles and responsibilities in child protection (3/3)

Who	What
Courts	
Children's Court	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ hears and determines most applications for care orders relating to children and young people ▶ identifies children at risk of harm in any proceedings before the court ▶ ensures that the best interests of children and young people are paramount in court considerations, and that children and young people have the fullest opportunity to be heard and to participate in the proceedings
Children's Court Clinic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ provides expert clinical assessments of children, young people and their families involved in care proceedings
Family Courts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ report children and young people suspected of being at risk of harm ▶ manage and adjudicate disputes between parents or others with parental responsibility for children and young persons, including living arrangements, time spent in the company of and communicating with parents, and other parenting issues ▶ may refer parties to family counselling and family dispute resolution to assist them to resolve their disputes
Local, District and Supreme Courts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ manage and adjudicate criminal proceedings when a person is charged with abusing, neglecting or otherwise harming a child or young person ▶ hear appeals against decisions of the Children's Court
Independent Oversight and Support Agencies	
Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ promotes and monitors the overall safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people in the community ▶ promotes the participation of children and young people in decisions that affect them ▶ monitors and conducts activities associated with the NSW Working with Children Check
NSW Office for Children – the Children's Guardian (OCCG)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ promotes the best interests of all children and young people in out-of-home care ▶ ensures that the rights of all children and young persons in out-of-home care are safeguarded and promoted ▶ accredits designated agencies and monitors their responsibilities under the <i>Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998</i> and the regulations ▶ accredits adoption service providers ▶ authorises the employment of children under 15 years of age in the entertainment industry, for door-to-door selling, or for exhibition or still photography purposes
NSW Ombudsman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ monitors and reviews the prevention of reportable conduct and handling of reportable allegations by employers of all government and certain non-government organisations in NSW ▶ monitors and reviews the provision of community services provided by DoCS, DADHC and organisations that are funded, licensed or authorised by the Minister for Community Services, or the Minister for Ageing, Minister for Disability Services
Local councils and non-government organisations	
Local Councils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ report children and young people suspected of being at risk of harm ▶ promote a safe environment for children and young people who receive services from council or use council facilities
Non-government organisations (NGOs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ report children and young people suspected to be at risk of harm ▶ work collaboratively with government agencies when intervening with families ▶ provide a range of services to deliver care and support to at risk, abused or neglected children and young people, and their families
Non-government schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ report children and young people suspected of being at risk of harm ▶ inform students in their schools about their right to be protected from abuse and where they can get support ▶ provide child protection education to children and young people in their schools, and teach protective strategies to children in their preschools and child care centres
All employers	
All employers of designated agencies and public authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ notify the Ombudsman of reportable allegations against employees arising in the course of the person's employment, irrespective of whether the head of the agency believes them to be false, vexatious or misconceived ▶ investigate reportable allegations and convictions against their employees and take appropriate action as a result of the investigation

1.5 THE RESPONSIBILITY TO RAISE AND ADDRESS DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AGENCIES

All who are involved in the NSW child and family service system must be able to participate in, influence and contribute to its overall efficacy. It is important that all agencies be committed to working together and are open to challenges and feedback from their interagency partners.

Different perspectives and competing priorities will occur from time to time. Differences may be about decisions made in relation to a particular child or young person, roles, professional and organisational philosophies or priorities, systems issues, status and perceived power issues, communication, level of commitment to the interagency approach and group dynamics, and attitudes and beliefs about families and community standards.

A measure of the success of our interagency work will be the manner in which agencies exercise their responsibilities in resolving differences or in considering what further action may be required of them to move forward, notwithstanding any differences.

Where differences occur, early acknowledgment of this is critical to avoid unproductive disputation and to fulfil the collective commitment to acting in the best interests of children and young people. This will assist each party to consider whether there is something more or different that could or should be done within their own agency or through interagency work to progress an issue.

This would include each agency considering internal responsibilities and options where there appears to be a difference that gives rise to concern about an ongoing risk to a child or young person. For the Department of Community Services, this may involve seeking more information from a reporting agency or providing more information to them. For a reporting agency, this may involve gathering and providing more information to accompany a report or to supplement a previous report, or in some cases it may warrant a further report.

There may be cases where a fundamental difference is identified and it is most appropriate to seek interagency review of the matter. It is expected that all agencies will have a clear policy on review and resolution of concerns raised by or in relation to agency partners. The following diagram, 'A Model for Resolving Interagency Differences', provides a generic model for resolving differences between agencies (noting that other dispute resolution processes may need to be followed depending on the nature of the dispute). The model is not designed to assign fault but rather to improve both processes and outcomes. The key proposed steps are:

1. identify the issue and the outcome sought. This may be done in consultation with your line manager
2. as appropriate to the circumstances, approach the worker concerned and talk directly with them about the dissatisfaction. Personal skills of negotiation and active listening will assist in developing a timely resolution
3. if there is still dissatisfaction or complaint, then consider an approach to the worker's line manager. This may be undertaken by the respective line managers. If a review of a decision is being sought, it may be appropriate to document the issues and/or concerns in writing so that the process has added clarity and accountability
4. if this doesn't help, then approach the next most relevant senior officer in the organisation or that agency's specialist complaints officer or unit, if and where this option exists. Chief Executive Officer (CEO) level resolution should be considered in cases where protracted cross-agency differences are impeding the ability to deliver an efficient and effective response to clients
5. if this doesn't help, then CEOs may consider it appropriate to go to an independent body or a mediation process.

Diagram 1.1: A model for resolving interagency differences

