

doi.org/10.61605/cha_3099

Volume 48 Suppl.1

Article type: Conference Report

Place-based partnerships in the child and family services sector: A case of emergence

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CITATION: Goulding, C., McGregor, P., & Treyvaud, A. (2026). Place-based partnerships in the child and family services sector: A case of emergence. *Children Australia*, 48(Suppl.1), 3099. doi.org/10.61605/cha_3099

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Background

The City of Ballarat, Grampians Health and Uniting Vic.Tas (Ballarat) formed a cross-sector partnership in response to identified gaps in the local child and family services sector. Sector-wide consultation revealed that services often operated in parallel, resulting in limited visibility and collaboration across agencies and inconsistent knowledge of referral pathways. These gaps were experienced as missed opportunities for comprehensive and coordinated support for children and families in Ballarat, Victoria.

The partnership sought to address these issues by building shared knowledge and understanding, strengthening professional networks and improving system navigation across the health, education, early childhood and community sectors. In shaping its approach, the partnership drew on established evidence around collaborative practice, collective impact and systems improvement, as well as local insights from practitioners and community needs assessments, to design and deliver a monthly professional development and networking series.

In this way, the partnership was anchored in clear strategic intent, a defined theory of change and shared governance mechanisms. It also drew on conceptual thinking about living systems, collaboration and the ARACY Nest Framework (ARACY, 2014). Importantly, however, it also enabled emergent ideas and

practitioner-led responses to inform the design of next steps in both the partnership and the development of the information sessions, which provided the key deliverables of the collaboration.

Shared principles including fidelity to action, joint decision-making, equal resource contribution, flexibility and responsiveness and ongoing evaluation guided the partnership model. These principles provided a strong foundation for a coordinated and locally driven solution.

Strategic co-design and implementation

The partners co-designed 'Ballarat's children: Collaborating for systems improvement sessions', a monthly professional development and networking series. The design was intentionally strategic: it sought to strengthen system literacy, enhance collaboration and create a predictable, high-quality learning environment for practitioners across the region.

Sessions incorporate a blend of structured learning, facilitated activities and relationship-focused networking. The information sessions were shaped around each of the Nest domains, and panel members were drawn from across child and family services organisations that provide parenting programs, mental health and wellbeing services, schools, local government and a raft of other services.

As the program progressed, its evolution reflected a balance between strategic planning and emergent adaptation, with activities such as speed networking introduced in response to participant feedback.

The sessions attracted attendees from health services, allied health, early childhood (including maternal child health), education, community organisations and family support services. The 2-hour sessions typically included a panel discussion, with panel members representing local services and organisations and, where relevant, a keynote speaker started the session. Attendees could participate and workshop ideas after the panel presentation at most of the sessions.

Over the initial 12-month period, participation was broad and grew steadily as practitioners recognised the value of cross-sector connection. The initial evaluation period covered 12 months, with sessions continuing beyond the original partnership structure as the model evolved.

Measuring success

Across the 12-month implementation period, the program attracted nearly 300 attendees, including approximately 30 practitioners per session, demonstrating strong and sustained engagement. Across the 2 years of the sessions, more than 30 organisations have been represented among the attendees.

A mixed-methods evaluation framework was embedded from the outset to assess both immediate and longitudinal impacts on practitioner knowledge, network development and system coordination.

Success was measured through survey instruments including pre/post measures of system knowledge, referral pathway understanding and professional networks. Session feedback loops also informed iterative refinement of session design and content.

Evaluation outcomes

The evaluation demonstrated measurable impact across the local child and family services ecosystem. Over the 12-month period, practitioners reported significant gains in their understanding of the local service ecosystem, including a 21% increase in overall service sector knowledge and a 25% increase in referral pathway knowledge.

These quantitative improvements were reinforced by qualitative findings showing strengthened network density, more confident and consistent collaborative behaviour and increased resource sharing between agencies. Participants also described clearer and more efficient referral processes, alongside more open and productive interagency communication, which contributed to enhanced trust and deeper professional relationships. The sessions were consistently experienced as being valuable, with positive practitioner feedback highlighting both the quality of the content and the opportunities for meaningful cross-sector connection.

Such good information on other services that relate to my work, and I have never heard of before. (Session participant)

Expanded knowledge of services. (Session participant)

Follow-up referrals to services I didn't know existed. (Session participant)

Combined, these findings demonstrate measurable system-level change and were interpreted as strong indicators of both program impact and partnership effectiveness, with the success of the partnership inferred from the evaluation results for the sessions. The significance of these outcomes was further recognised through the '2024 Victorian Early Years Award for Collaborative Partnerships', and the continuation of the sessions beyond the original formal partnership structure illustrates sustained practitioner ownership and enduring local relevance.

Lessons learned

Participants consistently valued opportunities for connection, shared learning and insight into other services' roles and limitations. The sessions helped to break down silos and provided a trusted space for troubleshooting shared challenges.

As the project evolved, attendees gravitated toward more informal discussion and relational connection. This shift led to the inclusion of unstructured networking time and increased emphasis on peer relationships – demonstrating *emergence* (Goldstein, 1999) as practitioners shaped the direction of the initiative themselves.

Challenges

Several challenges shaped the implementation and evolution of the partnership. Coordinating contributions and time commitments across the partner agencies could be complex, particularly given competing organisational priorities. As the partnership matured, shifts in organisational roles and responsibilities introduced further complexity, making it necessary to continually recalibrate expectations with more limited capacity, and still sustain momentum. These challenges highlight the need for flexible governance arrangements and a shared commitment to purpose across partners.

Practice insights

Despite these challenges, the initiative generated important insights into place-based systems change. Responsive and iterative planning – supported by real-time evaluation – proved essential, enabling the sessions to evolve in ways that were both evidence-informed and aligned with practitioner needs. The principle of emergence (Goldstein, 1999) became particularly visible as coherent patterns of practice developed organically through strengthened relationships and cross-agency collaboration. The work demonstrated that a cross-sector partnership can significantly shift a local service ecosystem when grounded in shared principles, clear purpose and ongoing feedback loops. Embedding evaluation from the outset ensured that adaptation was meaningful and strategically aligned, reinforcing the value of an approach that is both deliberate and adaptive within complex systems.

Conclusions and considerations

This partnership demonstrates the transformative potential of strategically designed, place-based, cross-sector collaboration in strengthening outcomes for children and families. By bringing together local government, state government and not-for-profit community services, the initiative created a shared platform for practitioners to deepen their understanding of the service ecosystem, build trust and develop more collaborative approaches to supporting families.

The work exemplifies partnership approaches that position children and families at the centre. The initiative also functions as a place-based model, grounded in local context and designed to respond to the specific challenges and opportunities present within the Ballarat services system.

Finally, the collaboration illustrates the value of sector–government partnerships, showing how shared governance, pooled resources, shared perspectives and collective commitment can improve service integration and produce sustained community benefit.

As systems continue to evolve, this case offers important considerations for future work. Successful place-based partnerships require deliberate structures that support: adaptive, emergent practice; mechanisms for continuous, embedded evaluation; and shared principles that hold partners steady through shifting priorities. When these elements are in place, cross-sector collaborations can not only improve coordination and referral pathways but also reshape the service landscape in ways that meaningfully enhance outcomes for children and families.

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