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OPEN Symposium 2025

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Introduction

The annual OPEN Symposium, delivered by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre), brings together practitioners, researchers and policy makers to share learnings. At its core, the Symposium creates the space to bring together and share different forms of knowledge to improve practice and, over the longer term, support better outcomes for children and families.

The Symposium is one of the ways that the Centre's Outcomes, Practice and Evidence Network (OPEN) delivers on its broader purpose, strengthening how knowledge is shared and used in practice and building the capability of the child and family services sector to apply evidence and learning to improve outcomes.

The OPEN Symposium 2025, held online on 21 and 22 October 2025, brought together over 200 people from across Australia, with the theme of 'Collaborative practice: Working in partnership with children and families'.

Children and families who come in contact with the child and family services often experience multiple, intersecting challenges, including family violence, mental health challenges, housing instability and financial pressure. These are not discrete issues, and they are not experienced in isolation. Yet services are often structured in ways that require families to navigate multiple systems, retell their stories many times and bridge gaps between services and other supports.

No single service, discipline or organisation can respond alone to this complexity. Collaboration is therefore not an 'add-on' to good practice, it is fundamental to achieving better outcomes. Working

across organisational and system boundaries reduces duplication, eases the burden on families and supports more coordinated care. This must also extend beyond services to include children, families and people with lived experience, recognising their expertise and shaping responses accordingly.

OPEN Symposium 2025

OPEN Symposium 2025 showcased the ways in which organisations are working in partnership with each other, researchers, people with a lived experience of the service system and allied services to improve access, support and outcomes. Across the Symposium program, presentations highlighted practice approaches to reduce fragmentation, strengthen shared understanding across workforces and build more connected systems of support.

Over the course of 2 days, attendees heard 18 presentations from 23 organisations and researchers from across Australia, including from our keynote speakers and sponsors.

The presentations reflected a wide range of contexts, approaches and stages of maturity, from emerging partnerships to more established system-level collaborations. Despite the diversity of topics across the presentations, strong and consistent themes emerged about the importance of collaboration and what is required to support meaningful and sustained change for children, young people and families in complex service environments.

Themes included:

- *Effective collaboration is relational, adaptive and grounded in local context* – requiring trust, shared learning and flexible partnerships that can respond to complexity and evolving needs over time.

- *Collaboration is a core mechanism for addressing complex and intersecting needs*, rather than an 'add-on' to the existing siloed service system. Cross-sector responses need to be integrated and coordinated around the whole child, young person and family.
- *Lived experience, cultural authority and community expertise are invaluable components of collaborative practice*, reflecting a shift towards more participatory approaches to governance, design, implementation and evaluation, and moving beyond consultation towards more genuine power sharing. *Sustaining collaboration requires more than individual relationships or short-term projects; it requires the embedding of collaboration within organisational systems*, while also acknowledging challenges created by funding, compliance culture and organisational boundaries. *Collaboration is a critical systems capability that enables sectors and communities to learn, adapt and work relationally* to support prevention, early intervention and more responsive support for children and families.

Together, the OPEN Symposium 2025 presentations demonstrated that while collaboration is complex and challenging, it is both possible and essential. The reports presented in this special issue provide practical and transferable insights for strengthening more connected, responsive and learning-oriented systems to improve outcomes for children and families.

Keynote addresses

Dr Penny Hagen and Angie Tangaere's opening keynote address, 'Activating our collective learning capacity for shared outcomes', set the scene for the Symposium. Tapping into their work in the Auckland Co-design Lab, they introduced the Niho Taniwha Framework, a place-based learning system approach that brings together policy, community values, cultural knowledges and lived experience to connect local practice with system-level change. The framework emphasises collaboration across the system, positioning stakeholders as active contributors while acknowledging power dynamics and structural constraints. Grounded in trauma-informed, values-led practice and traditional knowledge, it offers a practical approach to working in partnerships with communities.

Professor Alina Morawska's keynote, 'Childhood screen use: Challenges and supports for families', explored the growing public health concern of childhood screen use and the challenges families face in managing it. Drawing on current evidence, she highlighted the need for coordinated responses across families, schools and communities, with shared language, responsibility and practical strategies to support children's wellbeing.

The keynotes were followed by sector-led presentations, a sample of which form this special issue of *Children Australia*. These Symposium Reports are written by professionals from small, medium and larger child and family organisations and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, metro and regional organisations and a university. They are grouped by theme: place-based partnerships; Aboriginal-led approaches; prevention and early intervention programs; embedding lived experiences; and integrated responses to complex needs.

Place-based partnerships

Goulding et al. (2026) describe the success of a cross-sector partnership between the City of Ballarat, Grampians Health and Uniting Victoria (Ballarat) in response to gaps in the local child and family services sector: a monthly professional development and networking series titled 'Ballarat's Children: Collaborating for Systems Improvement Sessions' that aimed to strengthen system literacy, enhance collaboration and create a predictable, high-quality learning environment for practitioners across the region.

Aboriginal-led approaches

In their report, Navez d'Aubremont and Arnold-Rendell (2026) present the lessons learned from early implementation of the Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency's (VACCA) redesigned residential care program – Gamadji Balit, which provides therapeutic care and support for Aboriginal children who are unable to live with their parents.

Prevention and early intervention programs

Reports in this section highlight the achievements of prevention and early intervention programs, including: Quantum Support Services' 'Adolescent Building Connections' (ABC) program, an evidence-based, trauma-informed program developed to provide the skills and understanding to encourage adolescents aged 12–17 years to form healthy and positive connections in their lives (Hancock, 2026); Anchor's 'Young Voices. Big Impact', an initiative that arose in response to a chronic lack of child-centred, trauma-informed homelessness supports (MacMull & Nicholson, 2026); Jesuit Social Services' 'What's ok? Australia', an online early intervention service for young people who have engaged in, or who may be at risk of engaging in, harmful sexual behaviours (Bateman, 2026); and Upper Murray Family Care's 'I Am Me', a family violence prevention program designed for children in 4-year-old kindergarten (Cousins & Klein, 2026).

Embedding lived experience

Brave Foundation's 'Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens' (SEPT) program provides an example of centring young people's voices. In this program, parents' voices, choices and strengths drive service design and delivery, and outcomes extend beyond program metrics to transform systems and challenge entrenched inequities (Wilson et al., 2026).

Integrated responses to complex needs

Gauntlet et al. (2026) describe an integrated service–research model, the 'Steps to Confident Parenting' program, which uses a strengths-based, tailored approach that combines intensive parenting support with family services and a rigorous research component to address over-representation of parents with intellectual disability or cognitive delay in child protection interventions.

Millet et al. (2026) present a collaboration between Australian Childhood Foundation and Karla Kuliny Aboriginal Corporation, with input from young people, to divert young people away from the youth justice system in the equine-assisted program, 'Equestrian Youth Engagement Service' (EYES).

Symonds et al. (2026) illustrate how, in the face of system and sector failures and gaps (particularly for children with disability), Berry Street Yooralla is working to build and advocate for an integrated approach that sees the whole child and their relational context – bringing trauma-informed and disability-informed practice and services together, rather than expecting families to navigate multiple disconnected systems.

Conclusions

The reports in this special issue provide excellent examples of the many and varied ways in which practitioners and organisations across the child and family services sector partner and collaborate to improve outcomes for children and families. Improving outcomes ‘takes a village’ and requires real innovation. The willingness of contributors to share their work and insights not

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only reflects this commitment but also strengthens the broader learning system and supports more connected and collaborative practices across the system.

These reports represent a sample of the presentations from the OPEN Symposium 2025. To see recordings of the full program, visit <https://outcomes.org.au/open-symposium-2025-recordings>.

The Centre extends our thanks to the generous sponsors of the OPEN Symposium 2025: VACCA; Anglicare Victoria; Australian Childhood Trauma Group; Berry Street Yooralla; Family Life; and CSNet. We also thank all of the presenters and attendees and everyone who submitted an expression of interest for their generosity in sharing their knowledge. Finally, we acknowledge the Victorian Government for its continued support of OPEN. We look forward to the next OPEN Symposium.

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