

Child and Family Support System (CFSS) *Research Approach*

2025–27



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge and respect Aboriginal people as the state's first people and recognise Aboriginal people as traditional owners and occupants of lands and waters in South Australia. We acknowledge that the spiritual, social, cultural and economic practices of Aboriginal people come from their traditional lands and waters, and that the cultural and heritage beliefs, languages and laws are still of importance today. We are committed to ensuring that the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people are incorporated in the design, development, monitoring and evaluation of efforts across the Child and Family Support System.

'Cultural Lenses of Practice'

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Introduction

The Department of Human Services (DHS) is building research and evidence to inform a stronger family support system – one that is proactive, preventative and improves outcomes for children and families experiencing complex problems and disadvantage.

A primary focus of DHS's research and evidence development activities is to support the implementation of the Child and Family Support System (CFSS). The CFSS is a combined system of non-statutory services and supports delivered by government, non-government organisations (NGOs) and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). Services and supports are designed to respond to different degrees of complexity and safety concerns of children and families.

The system has a priority focus on supporting Aboriginal children and families. It is also designed to support all members of the community inclusive of ability, gender, sexuality, culture, religion, class and language.

“The shared vision of the CFSS is that all children are safe and well at home in family, community and culture.”

The **CFSS Research Approach** sets out research priorities, methods and evidence development activities. It will inform thinking and planning around several activities, including the future allocation of resources and the progression of research partnerships with external organisations. Through progressing the goals of the **CFSS Research Approach**, the department will be developing social data assets that will contribute to the state government's social data capabilities, and ultimately lead to improved outcomes for South Australian children and families.

The CFSS Research Approach outlines how research and evaluation efforts are being focussed to understand:

- How we can provide the best support for families, to keep children and young people safe and well, in their families, communities and culture
- What works for whom, and why, and what impact the CFSS is having on outcomes for children and families
- How the CFSS interacts with other service systems and how together we can create a stronger, more integrated family support system.

DHS has developed a CFSS Learning System that supports a holistic and iterative approach to evidence development. It brings together data, research, system observation, practitioner experience, lived experience of children, young people families, and the cultural knowledge and experience of Aboriginal people.

The **CFSS Research Approach** aligns with a range of state and national initiatives that are aiming to drive change to improve safety and wellbeing outcomes for children and families. In particular, it has close linkages with the priorities set out in *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031*, the strategic priorities of the South Australian Government's State Social Data Asset Committee, and DHS's commitments to achieve the targets and priority reforms in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. It also aligns with the recommendations arising from the South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care. These state and national initiatives are described in more detail at Attachment 1.

“Significant advancements have been achieved with evidence collection tools and data infrastructure. This provides new capabilities for the CFSS Learning System, enabling an understanding of the needs of the CFSS population and the outcomes that are being achieved. This is creating an enhanced opportunity to share, integrate and analyse data across government, NGOs and ACCOs.”

CFSS Research Approach at a glance

GOALS

To build evidence to inform the ongoing advancement of a stronger family support system that is proactive, preventative and improves outcomes for children and families.

To advance research methods for social services research.

FOCUS AREAS

Focus area 1

CFSS population

Who are the families that need targeted supports and what supports do they need?

Focus area 3

CFSS impact

What works to support children and their families?

Focus area 2

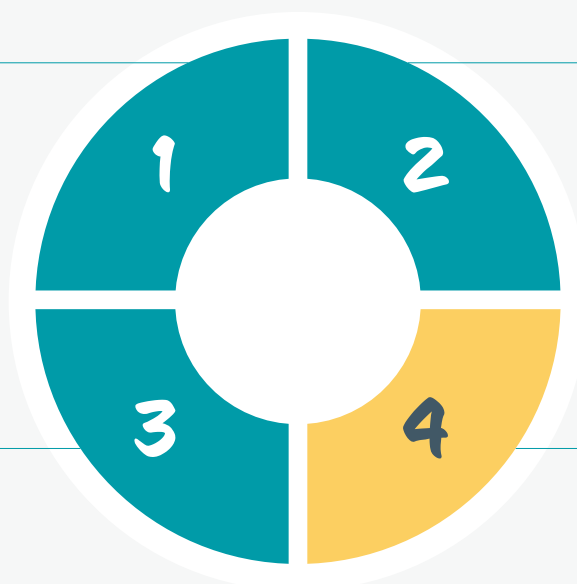
CFSS response

How does our system respond or need to respond to families?

Focus area 4

Methodological approaches

How can we contribute to the testing and learning of research methods?



These focus areas are supported by a detailed list of research projects. Further information is available on request.

Public health approach

The CFSS forms part of a broader public health approach to improving the safety and wellbeing of children. A public health approach emphasises the importance of prevention efforts at all levels of a system. CFSS services are a key part of the secondary level of prevention services. These services work with families who need targeted, specialised support to address well established risk factors for child abuse and neglect and to reduce the need for their involvement or escalating involvement in the statutory child protection system. Within the CFSS, there is a spectrum of family support services of varying intensity and duration to respond to different levels of family complexity and safety risk.

Whole of population efforts to lessen risk factors for child maltreatment need to be informed by population data science (epidemiology), to ensure the right families are receiving the right services, in the right locations at the right time. To achieve this, a population data science approach is enabling significant improvements in understanding the CFSS population needs, responsiveness and impact.

“Our epidemiological approach uses research evidence and longitudinal data to identify factors associated with different health and welfare outcomes. It moves beyond reporting counts of incidents and processes to explore the patterns of risk factors in populations.”

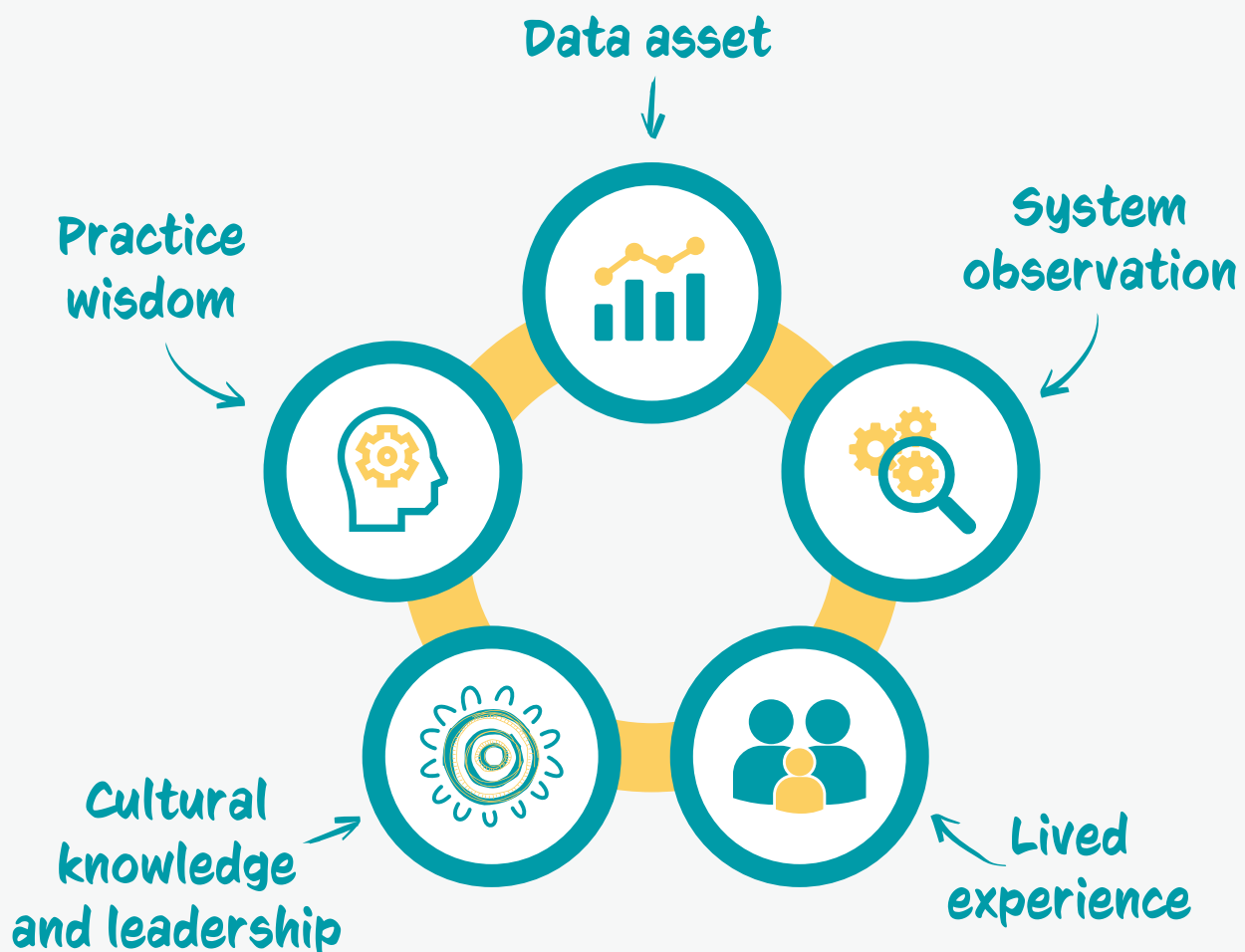


CFSS Learning System

A new CFSS Learning System has been developed to support the continuous monitoring and evaluation of the CFSS. To build the knowledge required to deliver better family support services, the CFSS Learning System embeds a holistic approach to research and evidence development.

This means that there is a commitment to incorporating population data science, practice-informed evidence, lived experience evidence from the children, young people and families, cultural knowledge and leadership and system observation.

“All of these elements work together to create, share, implement and refine the evidence-based service system.”





The CFSS Data Asset has been designed from the ground up, including the development of new population data capture tools and operational systems to manage referrals, service placements and service delivery. Data is collected by CFSS practitioners to provide insights into all families referred to the centralised CFSS Pathways Service. Importantly, this captures data for those families who are not offered, or do not engage in support services. This means we can now be better informed about the needs of the whole CFSS population.

This data collection follows the family through various contact points with services, to measure families' experience of services and changes in families' risk and wellbeing over a longer time span.

The CFSS Referral and Outcomes Monitoring System (ROMS) securely collects and links data on all families referred into the system. The data is transformed and linked with other relevant agency data to provide a longitudinal view of the CFSS service population. The sensitive nature of this data requires a framework that upholds both security and governance, striking a balance between protecting information while fostering a collaborative research environment.

“Our integrated dataset is helping us to understand the pathways of disadvantage from childhood through to adulthood and can inform how we design programs to disrupt disadvantage and vulnerability at critical points.”

Most service systems have limited collection of the short-term outcomes (e.g. what are the immediate outcomes from receiving the service), the CFSS Data Asset not only increases short-term outcomes collection but also helps to understand what difference is made in the longer-term, and the impact across multiple systems.

This is being achieved in collaboration with the Office for Data Analytics (within the Department of Treasury and Finance) through the State Social Data Asset to link the CFSS Data Asset with a range of data sets from across state government agencies (Department for Child Protection, Births Deaths & Marriages, SA Health, Youth Justice and Department for Education).

The integrated dataset supports understanding of the key characteristics and geographical distribution for the population of families who have contact with CFSS, as well as the broader population who have higher probability of contact with the child protection system.



Cultural knowledge and leadership

DHS is committed to supporting the growth of a culturally valid evidence base for the design and evaluation of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and supporting Aboriginal-led research to develop culturally informed assessment and outcomes measurement tools. Elevating the voices and decision-making of Aboriginal people and communities, including cultural governance oversight, is recognised as being essential to this work and to achieving best outcomes for Aboriginal children and families.



Lived experience

In order to deliver effective services, we must align our system to the lived experiences and preferences of our service-users. Our research efforts will include specific efforts to collect and understand the voices and experiences of children and of their families.

The CFSS Lived Experience Network (LEN) of system advisors provides an ongoing role in shaping the planning, monitoring and review of the CFSS. The LEN contributes to our research through their involvement in regular co-design sessions, working groups and consultations to advise on the appropriateness and acceptability of data collection tools, the interpretation of findings and the translation or meaning of research findings for policy.





Practice wisdom

The voices and insights of the CFSS workforce and practice leaders will inform our understanding of whether efforts and investments are improving outcomes for children and families. In-turn the evidence we gather will also be used to build practice wisdom by informing the development of practice standards and policy.

The Communities of Practice model provides a mechanism for the workforce and leaders to draw on practice evidence experience and innovative approaches and solutions and to help translate new knowledge into policy or practice.



System observation

Ongoing observation of the CFSS enables DHS to measure and understand the impact and effectiveness of our system in providing suitable supports to families. This involves understanding and measuring governance structures, system dynamics, processes, and decision-making mechanisms.

System observation also includes a focus on understanding and measuring the interconnectivity between the CFSS and other relevant child wellbeing and family support service systems. Ongoing observation is utilised to inform the configuration and future design of the CFSS to support the best outcomes for children and families.



Focus areas

CFSS level	
Focus area 1: CFSS population	Focus area 2: CFSS response
Who are the families that need supports and what supports do they need?	How does the system respond or need to respond to families?
We are building the evidence to understand the following for families referred to the CFSS: • Social-ecological factors • Culturally informed perspective on the needs of Aboriginal families • Differences in the needs of families • Prevalence of disability in children and families • Children at greatest risk of developmental vulnerability.	We are building the evidence to understand: • Configuration of the service system – understanding unmet need and the type and location of services needed • Timing of service provision – and its influence on referral systems, prioritisation, rates of re-referral and engagement • Cumulative harm and effective responses • Gaps and opportunities to respond to child safety concerns in broader service systems • Impact of funding and contracting models on service provision • Management of escalating risk to children • System design using the voice of children • Development of culturally safe, evidence-informed assessment tools.

CFSS level

Focus area 3: CFSS impact

What works to support children and their families?

We are building the evidence to understand:

- Impact of reforms on the effectiveness of service models
- New or emerging service models and therapeutic interventions
- Impact of changes or improvements in child safety and family functioning on long term outcomes
- Impact of findings on theories or models of change for early intervention approaches
- Effectiveness of services for Aboriginal children and their families – including the relevant outcome targets under the National Agreement for Closing the Gap (Outcomes 12 and 13).

Methodological approaches

Focus area 4:

How can we contribute to the testing and learning of research methods?

We are advancing research methods for social services research by:

- Strengthening population data and social epidemiological approaches in child safety and wellbeing research
- Improving government data infrastructure
- Supporting Aboriginal-led research and culturally safe methodologies
- Supporting capacity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to access and use locally relevant data and information to set and monitor efforts to close the gap, their priorities, drive their own development
- Implementing better quantitative methods and assessment tools for measuring safety and wellbeing outcomes.

Research partnerships

Collaboration will continue to occur with partners to help inform research to advance systems approaches to research, planning and evaluation.

Future research partnership goals include:

- Projects to improve the services that support the wellbeing and safety outcomes for children, young people and families
- Supporting research capabilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Funding small-scale projects supporting data collection infrastructure for research and trials
- Action research approaches to adjust service models and inform practice in response to feedback and findings.

Work with university-based researchers and other academics will contribute to building research capability within South Australia, and further existing work on family preservation and maltreatment. This includes supporting researchers to access departmental data, and collaborating on projects to further the development of an evidence base.



Integrating research findings into policy and practice

The research findings are of value to people working in the CFSS and multiple stakeholders in the community and associated service systems.

A range of strategies are needed to integrate findings into policy and practice. These include:

- High quality, regular reporting on data
- Action research and practice reflection that sheds light on the meaning and application of research findings in practice
- Deliberative dialogue between policy makers and decision makers in the CFSS and across the key associated service systems.

DHS will communicate emerging evidence through:

- Operational and strategic dashboards
- Publication of research reports on the DHS website
- Presentations at conferences and in other public forums
- Publications in peer-reviewed scientific journals.





Evidence implementation

A key element of the CFSS Learning System design is the implementation of research evidence to improve services and outcomes.

The **CFSS Research Approach** has been developed to support these broader system goals through a range of strategies that will include:

- Continuing to advance the data literacy of CFSS practitioners, supervisors, and service leaders
- Supporting practice-led action research initiatives
- Communicating and reflecting on emerging evidence insights across CFSS and more broadly across government and the non-government sector.

Attachment 1: Policy context

The **CFSS Research Approach** aligns with a range of state and national initiatives to support change to improve safety and wellbeing outcomes for children and families.



The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031

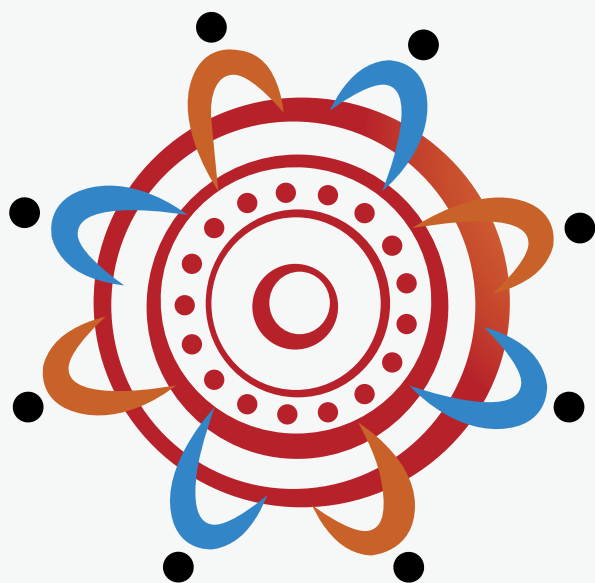
Of particular importance is *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031* (the National Framework). This sets out how all governments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and the non-government sector will work together to help children, young people and families in need of support.

“The National Framework has close linkages with the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032, the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2030 and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy. It also supports commitments under Closing the Gap and its four Priority Reform areas.”

National Agreement on Closing the Gap

All governments recognise that meaningful and sustained change requires Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions.

Under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the CFSS is particularly responsible for contributing to reducing the over representation of Aboriginal children and young people in out of home care, through policies and practices that ensure services are culturally safe, embedding family voice in decision-making, and supporting genuine shared decision making and the growth and self-determination of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).



Through the CFSS Research Approach, DHS seeks to contribute to Closing the Gap priorities by:

- Working with CFSS partners to identify data requirements for ACCOs. This includes increasing availability of data about community needs to inform service planning and investment strategies to support the growth of ACCO service provision and transitions
- Identifying population needs, service access inequity and exploring outcomes relevant to Aboriginal families and communities. This includes the development of culturally-informed methods for assessing service models and for reporting on the data collected
- Improving access to quality, culturally safe services, including active efforts to embed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle and to monitor our progress
- Supporting the development and establishment of the Aboriginal Child and Family Research Centre of Excellence (ACFRCE) to develop a targeted research agenda and commission research into best practice in culturally safe child protection and family support work
- Supporting the growth of an evidence base for culturally safe systems and services, working in active partnership with the ACFRCE to align research efforts and share evidence and findings.

The Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

The Final Report of South Australia's Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care has provided a plan for a significant boost to the early intervention system. It includes many new opportunities to develop strong connections with the CFSS, including shared early intervention research.

Areas of focus with direct relevance to CFSS include the exploration of:

- Models that support integrated service responses, including the 'glue' needed to sustain collaborative, holistic and coordinated approaches
- How DHS data, analytics and expertise can be used to help identify children at greatest risk of developmental vulnerability for service prioritisation, and access to early pre-school
- The potential for the child development data system and CFSS data system to link to improve measurement of outcomes.



