

Summary

How to Embed Learning Systems in Social Services:

A Case Study of South Australia's
Child and Family Support System

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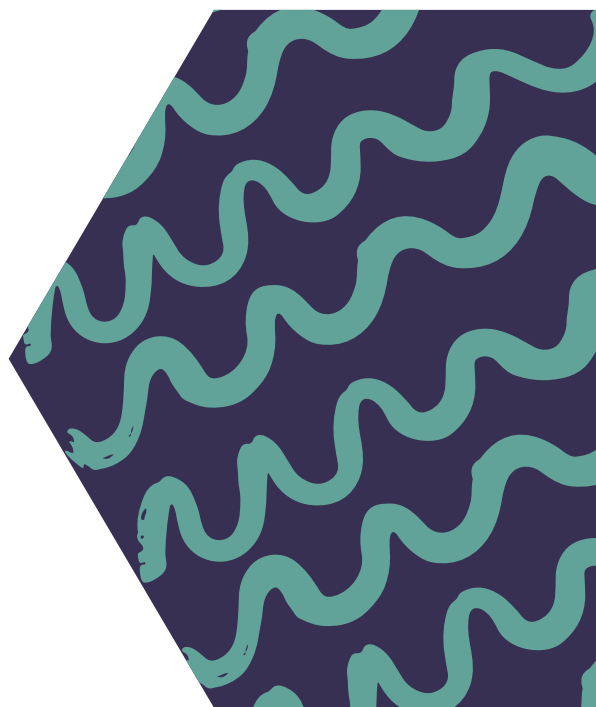
Acknowledgement of Country

The Centre for Policy Development and the Front Project would like to pay respect to Aboriginal peoples across South Australia and acknowledge their ongoing custodianship of lands and waterways throughout the state. We would also like to acknowledge the Bunurong Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, and the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation whose lands on which our various offices stand. First Nations peoples have long understood that flourishing comes

not from punishing and breaking apart families but from connection to culture and kin. Colonial child protection approaches continue to shatter the wellbeing of families across this continent in a way that disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. The Child and Family Support System is a step forward in this country's long journey of learning with First Nations people to enable families to flourish and thrive. We hope this case study can help other Australian jurisdictions to come along on this journey.

Acknowledgements

This summary document draws on the research and insights presented in the discussion paper, "How to Embed Learning Systems in Social Services: A Case Study of South Australia's Child and Family Support System," authored by Ryan Martin for the Centre for Policy Development (CPD) in partnership with The Front Project. We acknowledge the CPD as the project partner and thank all contributors whose expertise and experience informed the original work.



What is the child and family support system?

In South Australia the government Department of Human Services is the system steward for the Child and Family Support System (CFSS). The CFSS is a hybrid family support service system consisting of DHS Safer Families Services, and non-government organisations, and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (DHS and NGO/ACCO each account for approximately half of the service delivery footprint).

Key features:

Hybrid service system delivered in partnership between government and non-government organisations and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations

Support is tiered with increasing intensity based on need

Assessment and triaging of referrals are based on complexity

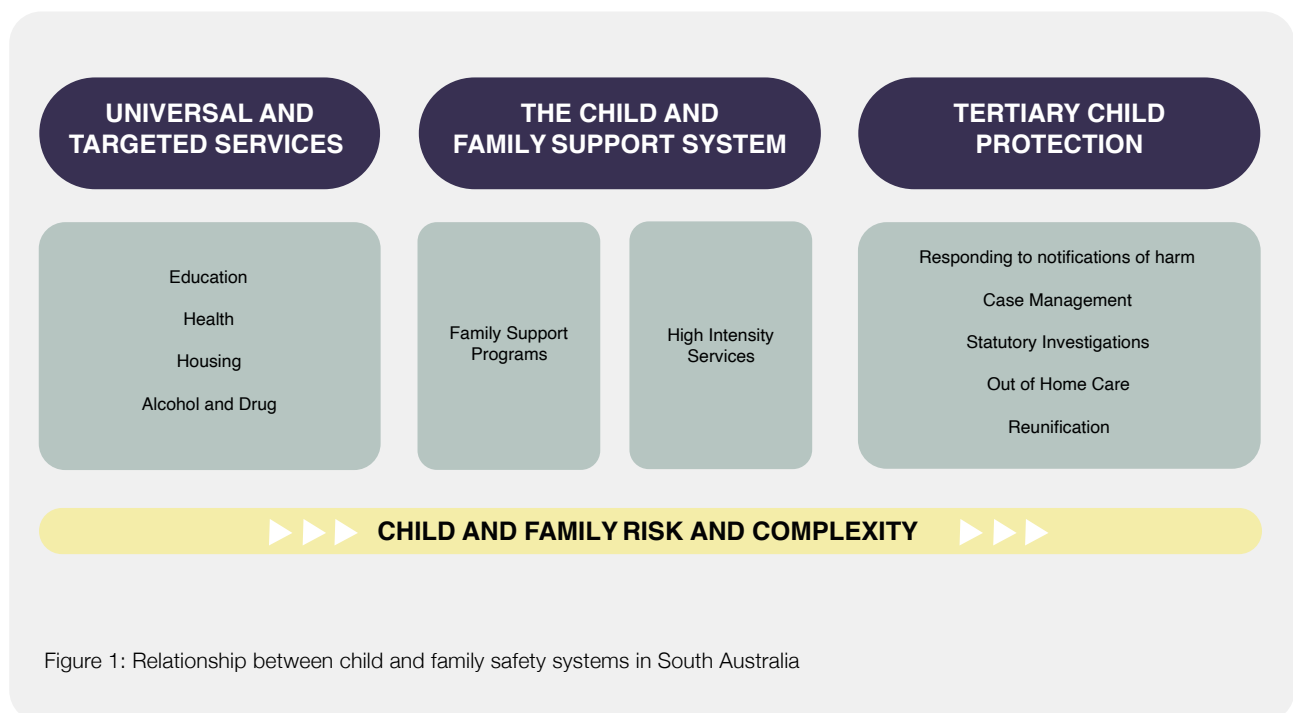


Figure 1: Relationship between child and family safety systems in South Australia

Child and families support system embeds learning through four mutually reinforcing mechanisms:





1

Data that answers real questions

CFSS collects structured data at intake, during service delivery, and after exit, then links it across child protection, health, education, housing and justice systems.

A dedicated epidemiology team analyses this data to understand:

- Which families benefit most from which services
- What drives engagement and outcomes
- Where unmet need exists in the system

This population level approach moves beyond one-off evaluations to continuous insight.



2

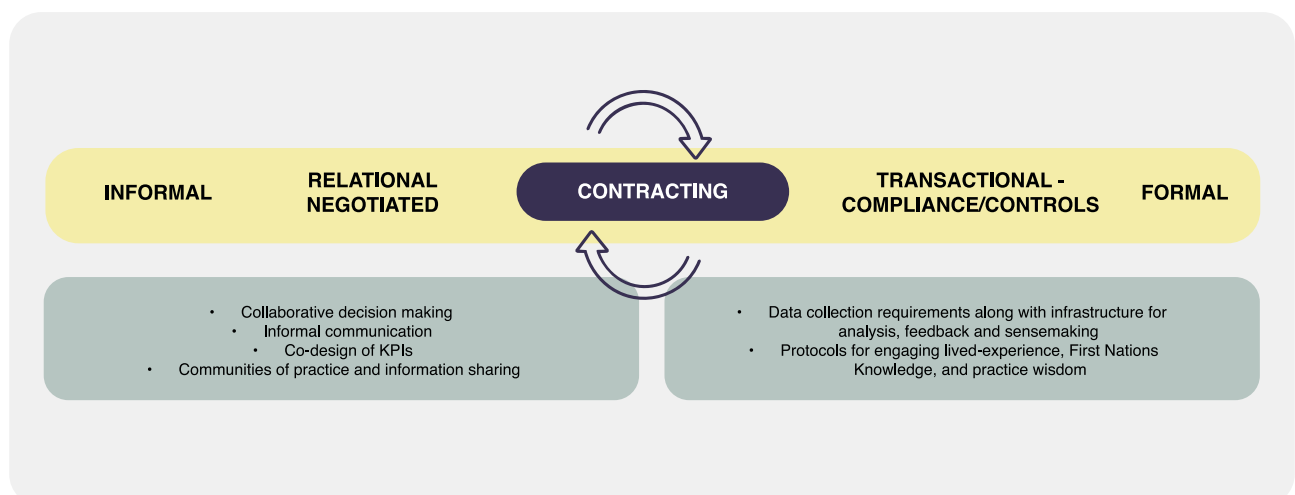
Relational contracting

Rather than relying on compliance-focused contract management, CFSS uses relational contracting. Government and providers agree on shared principles, maintain regular informal communication, and adapt performance indicators based on learning.

Key features include:

- Co-designed KPIs that reflect service realities
- Automated reporting to reduce burden
- Flexibility to adjust targets and timeframes

This form of contracting balances accountability with trust, formalising structures that enable honest conversations about what is working and what is not.





3

Lived Experience Network (LEN)

People with lived experience shape CFSS through a formal Lived Experience Network (LEN). LEN members are paid system advisors who translate experience into practical advice for policymakers, researchers and practitioners.

Their input directly influences:

- Data collection tools and language
- Practice guidance and training
- Senior executive decision-making

LEN ensures the system stays grounded in the realities of children and families and feeds into policy and practice.



4

Communities of Practice

CFSS brings practitioners together through statewide Communities of Practice. These forums combine data insights, lived experience perspectives and practitioner wisdom to improve practice.

Communities of Practice:

- Connects practitioners with people with lived experience
- Build shared understanding of complex issues
- Create collective ownership of system improvement

Attendance in CFSS Communities of Practice has grown to over 300 practitioners per forum, demonstrating strong engagement.

How learning translates to better outcomes

Because learning is continuous and shared, CFSS can adapt quickly. Evaluation efforts have found that:

93.2%

family
preservation
rate

over 24 months for
intensive family services

\$1.90

return

for every \$1 invested
(conservative estimate)

Engagement rates
increased from

69% to 81%

in three years, driven by improved practice rather than family risk profiles.

Just as importantly, practitioners report greater trust, clarity, and motivation, reinforcing a virtuous cycle of improvement.

Six lessons for Governments

The CFSS experience points to six transferable lessons for governments seeking better outcomes.

Actively steward learning

Invest early in data infrastructure and analytical capability. Decide what matters, measure it well, and use it.

Combine multiple ways of knowing

Structured data, lived experience, practitioner insight and First Nations knowledge together create better decisions.

Use contracting to enable learning

Shift from control-based contracting to trust-based relationships that prioritise improvement.

Engage lived experience properly

Treat lived experience as expertise. Resource it, protect it, and give it real influence.

Build a learning culture

Leadership focused on collaboration, transparency and evidence literacy are essential. Learning must be safe and valued.

Fund learning structures ongoing

Learning systems require sustained investment, not short-term projects.



What this means for policymakers

CFSS shows that governments do not need to choose between accountability and learning. With the right design, systems can do both.

The core question for governments is not “Does this program work?” but “How do we build systems that keep getting better?”

