

## Emerging Minds' Child and Family Partnerships Framework



### Introduction

Emerging Minds is committed to enable the voice of children and families with experiences of adversity and resilience to shape and contribute to their work. Emerging Minds refers to these relationships and processes as Child and Family Partnerships (CaFP). This framework seeks to outline Emerging Minds' commitment, ethical considerations and strategies for enabling CaFP to occur.

Emerging Minds believes, based on its own and the broader [literature evidence](#), that a partnerships approach with children and families will enhance the quality of products and activities developed and delivered, and thereby, outcomes for children and their families.

Emerging Minds conceives child and family partners (CaFPs) to provide unique and important perspectives (*experience-based knowledge or evidence*) which are valuable in terms of enhancing the quality of the products and outcomes for children and families, as well as the overall strategy and direction of the organisation. These perspectives are considered as valuable as those of other stakeholders such as practitioners (*practice-based knowledge/evidence*) and researchers (*research-based knowledge/evidence*).

### Emerging Minds:

- recognises the children, young people and adults within families and communities with many and varied lived experiences who have come before and led the way for this work to be able to be undertaken today,
- appreciates the experiences of these people who's pain, trauma and heartache, including harmful systemic practices, require recognition and compassion,
- recognises that services, resources and projects designed in partnership with children and families better reflect their needs, preferences and aspirations making services and resources more accessible, more useful, and more relevant to their local context,
- strives to acknowledge, value and incorporate the perspectives and understandings of children and families with experiences of adversity and resilience, and to embed these in all areas of work. This includes resource development, but also resource conceptualisation and the overall strategy and direction of the organisation and its projects,
- ensures that Child and Family Partnership practices are safe, purposeful, provide clarity regarding the extent to which participation will shape decision-making, and relevant to participants culture and circumstances,
- in relation to child partners, practices will comply with Emerging Minds' Child Safe Policy, and will be age-appropriate, honouring of children's creativity and imagination, run by skilled facilitators and child-friendly in relation to location, timing and duration,
- strives to ensure that children's and families' participation in partnership activities makes a positive contribution to their own wellbeing,

- prioritises the wellbeing of child and family partners in partnership activities and will embed support, debriefing and evaluation within its partnership practices,
- acknowledges partners' contributions in a variety of ways including providing reimbursement and remuneration to enable fair and just partnerships,
- is committed to valuing the voice and expertise of lived experience; and
- recognises that specific knowledge is required when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lived Experience Advocates

Emerging Minds acknowledges the different cultural considerations when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lived Experience Advocates. Emerging Minds has been given direction from our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lived Experience Reference Group that the name 'child and family partner' does not reflect their purpose. The preferred and recommended title – 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lived Experience Advocates' – better reflects that:

- the context of extended kinship systems is much broader than the child and family,
- each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, family and community comes with unique and diverse cultural experiences; and
- the reference group felt that it was important to their work to advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's needs on a broader, structural systems level.

We need to take great care and pay attention to additional and specific considerations when engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lived Experience Advocates. Much hurt has been experienced due to historical and ongoing pain caused by services, systems and policies. The considerations required can be quite different to other work we undertake with child and family partners, contributing through their lived experience. With guidance from our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lived Experience Advocates we have developed specific resources to highlight some of the considerations for us to be mindful of when incorporating lived experience perspectives in this context. These resources can be accessed [here](#).

Prior to undertaking any work with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Lived Experience Advocates, all staff are required to consult with the Senior Cultural Development Officer.

## Emerging Minds principles relating to Child and Family Partnerships

Emerging Minds has developed a set of 10 key principles and two relate to the area of CaFP specifically:

### *Principle 9 - Children's rights*

This principle emphasises the need for child-centred processes which empower children to freely express their needs, and to be involved in discussions and decisions about their mental health, in order to improve decisions, attitudes and services for children.

### *Principle 10 - Child, family and practitioner voice*

This principle emphasises that resources and services designed collaboratively with children, families and practitioners tend to be more effective, more acceptable to the individuals and families using them, and more relevant to their local context. Engaging with, and listening to, the views of children, families and community is a strategy used by Emerging Minds to improve outcomes for children and their families and implies more than simply consultation.

Engaging with child and family partners is believed to help products and services be as engaging and useful as possible, for those Emerging Minds ultimately aims to assist- children at risk of mental health issues and their families- and for intermediaries- the workforces involved in assisting them. In addition, Emerging Minds benefits from the engagement of partners, not only for the individual project they are involved with, but for the broader insights, data and capacity Emerging Minds has for empowering the voice and agency of children and families within future products and activities.

Emerging Minds recognises this approach requires additional planning, care, time and remuneration resources.

## What Emerging Minds have done to establish Child and Family Partnerships

Emerging Minds is in a strong position in terms of empowering CaFPs to enhance the quality of the organisation's activities and outcomes for children and families. Much has already been accomplished, and the organisation is at the stage of wanting to consolidate and extend on this practice. Emerging Minds aims to strive for continual improvement in this area of practice, and to be a leader in child and family partnerships work.

Key strategies undertaken to implement CaFP include:

- through Board and leadership influence and the values and commitment of staff, CaFP have been embedded as a part of Emerging Minds' core business. This includes adequate budget and time allocation.
- formal policies and procedures and a suite of guiding resources have been developed to facilitate CaFP and ensure they follow best practice and are ethical in their application.
- through leadership direction, CaFP have been embedded as a part of all staff's responsibilities.
- Emerging Minds have employed dedicated CaFP Coordinators to ensure an environment exists where CaFP can be successful, and to support other staff in implementing CaFP participation as a part of their work.
- Emerging Minds have developed a 'menu of participation' and a 'ladder of activities' to help staff consider their work in the CaFP space. More information on these is below.
- Emerging Minds have established a Child and Family Partnership Subcommittee of the Board to review, monitor and provide effective oversight of CaFP strategies, policies, procedures and practices.

### Menu of participation

Below is a diagram of the four broad types of partnership approaches that have been used across Emerging Minds activities, on a continuum from lower to higher levels of empowerment and agency/influence of partners within activities. This model conceptualises consultation and collaboration involve shared but not equal power, whereas co-design approaches involve shared power, and a partner-led approach involves delegation of power to partners. Emerging Minds staff are able to consider, select and tailor approaches according to their specific activity or project needs.

A *consultation* approach refers to intentionally seeking out the perspectives and views of child and family partners, to consider in decisions about product or activity content, format and processes. Consultations may take place across any of the range of project activities including planning, design and development, review, communications and marketing, and implementation and dissemination. A consultation approach may involve, for example, seeking partner feedback on a draft product prior to its finalisation and implementation.

A *collaboration* approach is more involved and may involve, for example, seeking partner input and feedback regarding project or process conceptualisation, planning, design and development, and finalisation.

A *co-design* approach includes child and family partners as essentially equal partners in decisions regarding the conceptualisation, design and development of projects or processes. Partners may also be engaged in other aspects of co-production (which is the umbrella term), such as co-planning, co-delivery and co-evaluation. For more on this, see [Co-production: putting principles into practice in mental health contexts](#).

A *partner-led* approach refers to partners being empowered to lead projects across all stages and be the ultimate decisions-makers across all aspects of the project. Partner-led approaches are uncommon currently within Emerging Minds.

All of these approaches are valuable and worth pursuing. All of them can be respectful, safe and empowering for CaFPs and can contribute significantly to the work of Emerging Minds.

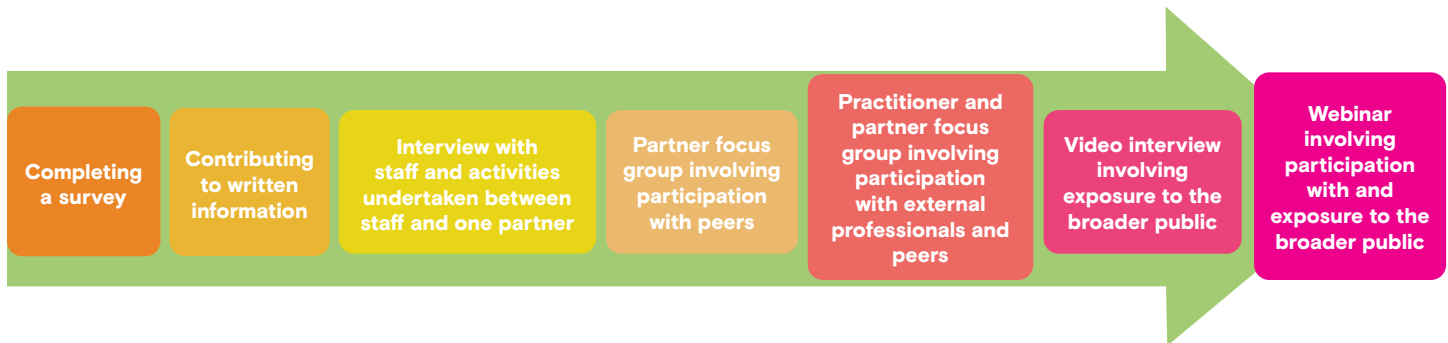
It is important to honour the CaFP process and strive to correctly label the approach we are undertaking, remembering that all are valuable and worth pursuing at different times for different reasons. In many spaces there can be confusion between consultation and codesign, for more on this issue, see [Consultation or Codesign?](#).



## Ladder of activities

As a general guide, the following are examples of engagement methods, organised on a continuum from lesser exposure to more exposure for partners. Generally, partners will start at the lower end and step through to methods on the higher end (if they want to) as their relationships, trust and knowledge about Emerging Minds builds. Influencing factors may include CaFPs desired level of anonymity, their willingness and confidence to talk openly or in depth about their experiences and views (ie self-disclosure), and their willingness and confidence to talk with one or more people, including peers, practitioners or the broader public (ie within public forums or webinars). Emerging Minds staff (with the support of CaFP Coordinators) are able to consider this range of options, and discuss with partners their interest or willingness to use any of these, in deciding methods to use for a given project.

This model is not exhaustive, but rather offers an example of some possible engagement methods.



## Infants, children and young people

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states: 'When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account.'

At Emerging Minds, there are three main ways we may access children's voices:

- reports and research that have collected and published children's voices and perspectives,
- engaging with existing groups/networks, such as Youth Advisory Groups; and
- our own process.

Activities need to be age-appropriate, honouring of children's creativity and imagination, run by skilled facilitators and ensure that a child's needs are considered in terms of the environment, timing and duration. Refer to the Child and Family Partnership Engagement Procedure and consult with CaFP Coordinators for more information.

Partnering with children and young people is an extremely valuable process. However, it's important that engagements are planned around the needs of children and young people. Prior to involving children and young people, staff are to carefully consider the appropriateness of the engagement and any risk to child safety or wellbeing. If there is significant risk, it is important to recognise this and consider other ways to access the voices of children, including through:

- children's voices that have already been published in research and through relevant peak bodies and Children's Commissioners. Remember children live within various types of families, communities and in out of home care,
- people who are now adults and who grew up in families experiencing adversity may reflect on their childhood experiences and share their wisdom; and
- parents who are living with adversity often have great insights into the worlds of their own children: their strengths, vulnerabilities, needs and desires.

## What Emerging Minds staff can do to ensure Child and Family Partnerships occur

Emerging Minds staff may undertake the following strategies to ensure CaFP occur within their work:

- consult with CaFP Coordinators as early as possible within all processes and projects.
- consider the 'menu of participation' and 'ladder of activities' outlined above.
- refer to this framework, policies, procedures and guiding resources as appropriate (see the related documents list below).
- value CaFPs and have ongoing discussions about their involvement.
- maintain relationships with existing CaFPs (also referred to as our 'CaFP pool'). This includes informing people when resources they helped develop are launched, and keeping in touch during periods of low involvement.
- seek new CaFPs with relevant experience through new and existing networks. This [info sheet](#) may be a useful resource to utilise, or staff may wish to develop their own project specific document. This [template](#) may also be useful. CaFP Coordinators can advise and assist with this process.
- utilise literature and reports that have already published the voices of children and families. Examples of this would be the [Create Foundations reports](#) and [children's commissioners](#).
- engage with peak consumer, carer, child and family groups to seek their voices. Examples of such groups would be [Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter \(FISH\)](#) and the [National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum](#). Note that not all members of these groups will be parents, so being clear about what you require when you approach them is important.



Some additional information regarding key considerations is outlined below.

### When to include child and family partners

When to engage child and family partners in a given project or process may depend on the budget and timelines. Having said this, consideration and planning in relation to their involvement ideally takes place in the early planning stages of projects, as set out in the [Child and Family Partnership Engagement Procedure](#). Emerging Minds templates and guidelines also assist with this process.

In terms of when child and family partners could be included, the literature indicates there are benefits for including partners as early as possible and in as many aspects of the project as possible, including in the project planning stage.

Planning the involvement of child and family partners in a given project is important. Aspects of the project planning may need to be partially clarified before involving child and family partners and other stakeholders, such as the:

- project context and scope.
- resources/budget (e.g. for remuneration of partners and other stakeholders, and time for project staff to analyse and integrate input from partners).
- timelines.
- what is non-negotiable about the project (i.e. what needs to/must happen).
- who the relevant partners would be, with an interest in the project and who may be impacted by the project.
- what would the purpose of their involvement/their role be.



Contribution in project conceptualisation could involve for example, providing experienced-based knowledge regarding defining the need/problem, project scope, target group, project aims and objectives, methods/activities, and identification of stakeholders. Staff do not need to understand the topic literature or research prior to involving CaFPs. CaFPs can help staff develop their foundational understanding.

## The importance of relationship

For child and family partnership work to be successful, it is important that it is relationship-based. This means that a positive and effective working relationship between staff and partners is a critical factor that underpins the collaborative work together, including when gathering input or feedback, and when making decisions about the project.

Whether using consultation, collaboration, co-design or partner-led approaches, effective relationship processes (e.g. respect, authenticity, transparency, effective communication, recognising people's discomfort or distress, holding space for emotions, and providing support throughout periods of participation) are critical, and determine the experience the partners have with Emerging Minds, as well as the project outcomes that are possible.

It is important to be aware that there are different kinds of relationships between CaFPs and Emerging Minds including:

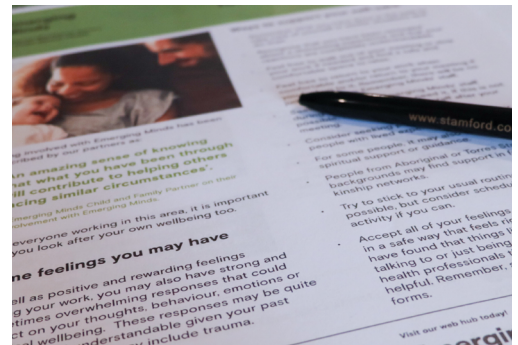
- one-off and short-term partnerships where people are involved for a time limited and specific task only.
- ongoing partnerships. These may evolve from short-term partnerships. These partnerships are deep, rich, can last for many years and are a unique and powerful source of guidance and advice.
- partnerships where another organisation is the relationship lead. These occur when we seek partners through professionals who have an existing relationship with the partner and are willing and best placed to take on the primary relationship/supportive role.

## Duty of care

Emerging Minds does have a *duty of care* for the child and family partners it engages and works with. It is paramount that all staff undertake sufficient planning and care to ensure that in their involvement with the partner, they do no harm. Emerging Minds staff have a range of skills and confidence in relation to working directly with partners, some may feel very comfortable. For others, their concerns about their lack of experience in this area, and fear of doing harm, may lead them to want to avoid working directly with partners. All staff are able to consult with the CaFP Coordinators and gain support as needed.

Advice from some of Emerging Minds' long-term partners regarding duty of care and risk include that:

- a mindful approach to the work, including picking up early on any distress being experienced by partners and offering suitable support, will help to ensure no harm is done.
- there will be mistakes made as staff are learning how to use this approach, but these mistakes are generally manageable within a relationship-based approach which pays attention to how the partner is 'travelling' with the work, shows respect, uses clear and helpful communication and offers suitable support when needed.
- staff offer partners the 'dignity of risk' by taking the steps to engage them in this work, and to believe in their strengths and resiliency in the face of adversities they have faced.
- outweighing the risks are benefits to be gained not only for project outcomes but for child and family partners, in terms of feeling they are contributing their at times 'hard won' knowledge and skills to improve resources, services and products, and even being able to strengthen their positive narratives about themselves and their lives.
- *trauma-informed practice* and *culturally-affirmative practices* help reduce the likelihood of harms and optimise the benefits of the exchange.



The benefits generally outweigh the risks and costs. Policies and procedures, this framework, and accessibility of CaFP Coordinators all intend to reduce risk and optimise gains from the partnership approach

## Creating a positive experience

The quality of CaFPs experience is important, including<sup>1</sup>:

- their experience of being invited to participate and the information provided to assist their decision to participate (e.g. context, purpose, remuneration process, informed consent, time taken/given).
- clarity about roles and responsibilities, including lines of reporting and accountability are provided (ie if they wished to provide feedback about their experience with someone other than who they directly worked with).
- the flexibility provided regarding the timing and method of engagement/providing input (e.g. email, phone, in person, individual/group). Flexibility also includes the ability to step back from CaFP roles during times of stress or adversity, and support to re-start when ready.
- the accessibility (i.e. transport, disability), quality of the venue, catering, introduction, facilitation (e.g. co-delivery by a partner) for an event (e.g. focus group).
- information communicated in a way they could understand, including use of interpreters and translations where needed.
- explanation about how their input will be used to influence decisions.
- discussion regarding confidentiality, uses of input and limits to use.
- discussion regarding support available and process if anyone experiences distress or reacts to something during their involvement.
- feeling comfortable sharing their knowledge and opinions.
- feeling their input was acknowledged and valued.
- sufficient time was available to participate effectively (e.g. to be fully informed at each step, be 'touch-base' as needed, to build a trusting/ comfortable relationship with project staff, to have additional communications as needed).
- staff were understanding and supportive.
- how different views and perspectives were managed.
- explanation of next steps and when and how they will be kept informed, and for this to be followed through (i.e. even if project timelines change, partners are communicated with in the timelines expected or otherwise in a timely way, and advised of these changes).
- multiple mechanisms to provide feedback (i.e. anonymous via survey, phone, email, etc.).
- the participation payment process.



## Power imbalances and emotional labour

When working in this space, it can help to reflect that staff have their own diverse experiences of adversity too: it's not 'them' and 'us'. However, for CaFPs coming into this space it can feel that there is very much a power imbalance between Emerging Minds and themselves. Working to create a respectful culture of collaboration sees us all as people of equal value with diverse experiences. It can also help to recognise children and families as experts in their own stories and experiences, with unique and valuable contributions to make, and to make a conscious effort not to privilege specific types of knowledge (e.g. research and practitioner). The goal is to be equals in partnership, or at the very least to minimise the power imbalance. Be honest with participants about how final decisions will be made (e.g. their level of influence within the organisation).

It is also important to recognise the, often invisible, emotional labour CaFPs will invest in their work with Emerging Minds. This emotional labour may be further enhanced for CaFPs from minority or marginalised groups. Staff can begin to address these issues by actively recognising them and following best practice CaFP strategies, including working to address power imbalances.

Continual awareness around these issues and checking in with the people you partner with will be important moving forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the Working Together Toolkit

## Handling and use of partner data

Data collected regarding partners may be *sensitive* in nature and *identifying* also, so needs to be handled with care. Some partners prefer the use of aliases within Emerging Minds records, presentations, or recordings.

Any records which include name and contact information regarding a CaFP are kept in a database called Zoho. This information is stored on servers in Australia and the data is only accessible to a limited number of Emerging Minds staff.

Some relevant guiding resources for video footage and other mechanisms for sharing publicly are the [Talking about your children and family publicly](#) process document, [Things to consider before doing a webinar](#) and [Things to consider before doing a video interview](#).