



**Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth**  
Working together to enhance the wellbeing and life chances of children and young people.

## **Questions and Answers – Developing a Common Approach to Assessment, Referral and Support: Part of the *National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009-2020***

### **What is the *National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009-2020*?**

The National Framework is a shared national agenda for change that is designed to deliver a substantial and sustained reduction in child abuse and neglect in Australia. It was endorsed in April 2009 by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and all Australian Governments are committed to implementing the actions it contains.

[More information on the National Framework is available here.](#)

The ARACY report *Inverting the pyramid: Enhancing systems for protecting children* identifies organisational and systems change strategies and processes for moving toward a prevention-focused family service orientation. This includes building the capacity of service providers for identifying vulnerable families and children and providing them with the assistance they need *before harm occurs* and they come into contact with the statutory child protection system.

To support the National Framework the Australian Government announced funding for a number of projects and has engaged ARACY, building on the evidence presented in *Inverting the pyramid*, to develop a common approach to assessment, referral and support.

More information on *Inverting the Pyramid* is available [here](#).

### **What is the Common Approach to Assessment, Referral and Support Taskforce?**

The Common Approach to Assessment, Referral and Support (CAARS) Taskforce has been established to drive the development of a common approach to assessment, referral and support for children and their families in times of need. The Taskforce is convened jointly by the Hon Jenny Macklin MP, Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and ARACY.

The CAARS Taskforce includes a broad spectrum of participants from government and non-government sectors. A full list of members can be [viewed here](#).

## **What is the purpose of the Taskforce?**

The CAARS Taskforce specifically focuses on prevention of abuse and neglect *before* harm has occurred, through the development of a common approach to assessment, referral and support. Developing a common assessment tool will help improve the capacity of organisations delivering services to families to identify and respond to children and families in need.

Early identification of children and families in need, coupled with appropriate referral and support, will provide assistance and support at the first sign it is needed and ultimately, reduce the number of children being abused or neglected.

## **Where does the Taskforce fit in the Framework?**

The Taskforce is one of more than 70 actions in the National Framework's first three-year action plan. It reflects the Australian Government's focus on early intervention services for children and families - it is not a panacea for addressing all the issues concerning child maltreatment.

## **What is a common assessment tool (CAT)?**

A common assessment tool is a mechanism for enabling/assisting service providers to raise and discuss issues of concern with children and young people (and their families) and subsequently open the door to support services that offer early intervention before 'concern' spirals into crisis.

The development of such a tool will only occur after the initial work of investigating, analysing and refining a range of options is completed. What is known at this stage is that any resulting CAT will need to be simple, flexible, easy to use and well supported by those professionals who might use it in day-to-day practice.

Following the recommendations of the CAARS Taskforce, the tool (or approach) will be considered for trialling in 2010/11.

## **Who will use a CAT and how?**

It is envisaged that a CAT will be used within one or more professions or service types providing day-to-day assistance/services to children and their families, such as doctors, teachers, counsellors and adult-focused service providers. Details about the applicability of the CAT to different professions will depend on final recommendations from the Taskforce about the nature, design and implementation of the CAT/s.

This focus on prevention aims at *universal* and *targeted* services rather than statutory child protection services, where the three levels of prevention are defined as:

- *universal* (or primary) interventions – strategies that target whole communities or all families in order to build public resources and attend to the social factors that contribute to child maltreatment (for example, those services provided by doctors, maternal health nurses, teachers, child care workers)

- *targeted* (or secondary) interventions – strategies that target families or children and young people with special needs or who are in greater need of support (for example, those services providing drug and alcohol support, mental health services, homelessness/housing assistance, crisis care)
- *statutory* (or tertiary) interventions – strategies that target families in which child maltreatment has occurred, seeking to reduce the long-term implications of maltreatment and to prevent maltreatment recurring (including statutory care and protection services)

### **Will a common assessment tool reduce available crisis intervention?**

No, the aim of a common assessment tool is not to replace statutory child protection responses but to intervene early, before a crisis response is required.

A crisis response will still be necessary in some circumstances – the Taskforce is not seeking to make changes to existing state and territory statutory child protection responses.

### **Why is this work needed?**

Current systems for protecting children in Australia are struggling to meet their primary objective: to protect children. The statutory child protection system is overburdened. Notifications of alleged child abuse and neglect have almost tripled nationally between 1999–2000 and 2007-08 ([read more](#)).

This represents increasing demand on the resources within child protection agencies to assess and investigate these reports, and more broadly on government resources. This escalation is unacceptable. A stronger focus on prevention will encourage responsibility for child protection across a broader cross-section of the community and ultimately, reduce the number of notifications to statutory pathways.

The best way to protect children is to prevent child abuse and neglect from happening in the first place. An approach that identifies families and children in need and provides them with the assistance they need before harm occurs is preferable to waiting until a child is harmed, and the family comes into contact with the statutory child protection system.

### **What is the role of the CAARS Taskforce?**

The Taskforce will investigate evidence-based, workable strategies for the development of a common assessment approach that could be used by a broad range of services that have day-to-day contact with children and families. The purpose of the tool will be to help service providers identify those in need of additional help or advice, in order to better support early intervention and prevention of harm to children through appropriate referral and support.

The CAARS Taskforce will focus on services most likely to encounter early warning signs of need such as doctors, teachers, counsellors and adult-focused service providers. At present, services

are not always equipped to respond with *early* assessment, referral and support in order to effectively deal with the problem before it escalates to a crisis response.

### **Who will benefit from the CAARS project?**

Ultimately, the beneficiaries of the project will be:

- children, young people and their families who are successfully connected with additional support at the first 'early warning signs' that help is needed;
- those service providers (within the professions/services to which the CAT will be tailored) who seek a simple, flexible and user-friendly tool for identifying and responding to the needs of children, young people and families *before* issues escalate into crises; and
- the currently overburdened statutory child protection services.

### **What opportunities are there for engagement with the CAARS Taskforce?**

There are many ways for individuals and organisations to participate in the work of the Taskforce, including:

- by invitation to participate on a working group;
- responding to questions posed by the consultant;
- attending stakeholder consultations; and/or
- through [ARACY](#).
- If you have any questions or would like to know more, contact [ARACY](#):

[enquiries@aracy.org.au](mailto:enquiries@aracy.org.au)

[www.aracy.org.au](http://www.aracy.org.au)

02 6232 4503