



COMMON APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT, REFERRAL AND SUPPORT (CAARS) UPDATE – MARCH 2010

1. SCOPING PHASE: June 2009 – December 2009

Previous CAARS [Updates](#) outlined the first part of the CAARS project:

- establishment of a national CAARS Taskforce to provide high-level project guidance and subsequent establishment of a Technical Working Group to provide detailed advice during the development of the 'common assessment approach';
- a comprehensive literature search on national and international research and practical application of common assessment tools and related mechanisms for information sharing and referral; and
- consultation workshops in all capital cities to engage the views of people from government and non-government representatives of universal, targeted and statutory services providing support to children and families. Around 220 people attended the workshops, which included participants in some regional centres, such as Townsville, Arnhem Land and Alice Springs. An additional consultation by teleconference engaged the views of doctors and nurses from different parts of Australia.

Based on the findings of the above, recommendations for 'common approach' options were presented to the Taskforce on 30 November 2009. The Taskforce considered the recommendations and agreed on one option to be further developed in greater detail.

An [Interim Report](#), reflecting the work to date and including recommendations for the development of the preferred option, was agreed by the Taskforce and subsequently submitted to the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

2. THE PROPOSED MECHANISM - DEVELOPMENT PHASE: January – February 2010

Development of the agreed option resulted in a proposal for a practical mechanism for promoting the safety and wellbeing of children, young people and families by identifying and responding to early indicators of need. The mechanism aims to:

- give service providers* a way to identify and respond to early indicators of need that is simple, flexible, easy to use, evidence-based and adaptable for use in different services;
* Universal service providers such as doctors, nurses, teachers, child care workers, etc.
- strengthen collaboration among service providers by promoting a common language and consistent approach to information sharing and referral within and between services; and
- facilitate a timely and child- and family-friendly pathway of support for children, young people and their families.

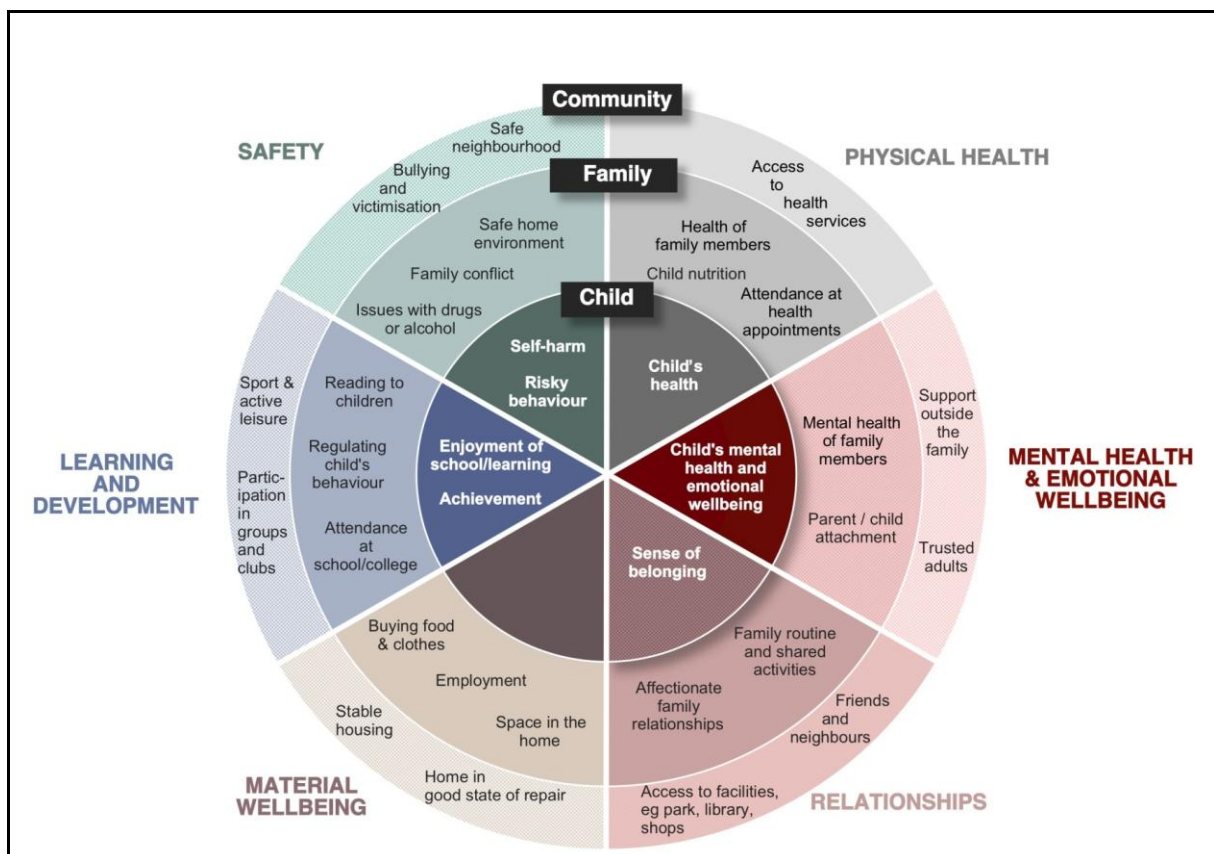
Technical Working Group members provided expert advice on the key components of the mechanism – ie practice principles, wellbeing domains and example indicators against which needs and strengths are mapped, professional judgement questions and prompts, and a self-assessment questionnaire.

Using the mechanism, visually presented as a wheel (see below), the practitioner is guided by high-level professional judgment questions and more focused prompts to encourage deeper levels of conversation with the child/family to identify underlying needs that appear to be unmet, as well as areas of strength. Where the balance of 'needs' and 'strengths' indicates vulnerability requiring some level of support, further prompts and guidance will steer the practitioner toward ways of accessing relevant support pathways.

Two key aspects of this approach are the centrality of the child and family in taking an active role in decision-making, and the importance of local knowledge about the availability—and non-availability—of formal and informal services.

On 24 February the Taskforce met to discuss the detail of the proposed mechanism. A draft report describing the individual components of the common approach, and including case studies, was presented to Taskforce members along with information on how to use the mechanism (the 'wheel').

A significant milestone of the project is the Taskforce's unanimous in-principle agreement to the proposal as a meaningful and useful way of opening up a conversation between practitioners and vulnerable children and families to enable *early* identification and *early* response. The Taskforce also made recommendations about issues or questions to be resolved as the proposed mechanism is refined, including suggestions about the content of supporting documentation and user guides.



*Six wellbeing domains and targeted example indicators, each supported by prompt questions (not depicted here), assist the practitioner to identify needs and strengths
Allen Consulting Group DRAFT 19 February 2010*

Details of the mechanism will be available as part of the final report to the CAARS Taskforce.

3. REFINEMENT PHASE: March – May 2010

Refinements to the agreed mechanism will be made in parallel with the final consultation stage, during which the mechanism will be 'sounded out' with key user groups. The professional groups to be consulted during April are:

- doctors, including paediatricians, GPs, psychiatrists
- nurses, with a focus on community health, maternal and child health, and mental health
- teachers – primary and secondary schools
- child care workers – centre-based day care, family day care
- Centrelink staff – with a focus on social work and case management.

Consultations will also be held with children and families, and will focus on the self-assessment component of the mechanism and the usefulness of this approach as a first step for linking children, young people and families with extra support at difficult times of life.

Feedback from the consultations will be taken into consideration as the proposed mechanism and recommendations for related processes for sharing information and accessing pathways of support are finalised.

4. FINAL REPORT: June 2010

Following the consultation period and final refinement of the proposed mechanism, a final report will be drafted for consideration by the CAARS Taskforce in June.

The final report will include a plan for piloting the needs-identification mechanism. The plan will include options for testing or piloting the mechanism in selected locations, sectors and/or professions/organisations.

NB: the actual implementation of that plan is beyond the scope of the CAARS project and would require additional funding.

5. FINAL TASKFORCE MEETING: 17 June 2010

The draft final report will be presented to the CAARS Taskforce on 17 June. Once agreed, it will be submitted to Taskforce co-convenors, Federal Families Minister Jenny Macklin and ARACY Board Chair Professor Fiona Stanley.

CAARS updates and ARACY contact details

Regular updates about the CAARS project are posted on the ARACY [website](#) and included in [current](#) and [archived](#) ARACY newsletters. Please don't hesitate to contact ARACY if you have any questions or would like any additional information.

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