Why do we need a better system?
There is strong and consistent evidence about the challenges, limitations, failures and excessive costs of the way we do things now. Reviews of family service systems show that many support services are themselves in crisis, and that children often slip through the cracks. We are not meeting the needs of children in an effective or sustainable way:

• There are waiting lists for many services and most specialist services are underfunded.
• Services can’t help with complexities - no single service is capable of meeting all a family’s needs.
• Services are not well connected with one another and there is not coordinated support to families. Families have difficulty finding out about and accessing the different services they need.
• Services are typically focused on programs and numbers of participants, rather than on outcomes for children. It is up to people to make sense of services, navigate from door to door, and ‘fit’ a program to qualify for support. It is then hard to make services ‘fit’ the diverse needs of families.
• Services are focused on solving a problem or treating an issue. They are not designed to respond early to needs or to help build resilience to prevent problems. We wait for a crisis, then we help.

Thinking differently
The evidence tells us that there is a strong and growing collection of programs that have consistent and positive impacts on child wellbeing. So why shouldn’t we just fund more of those programs? The reality is, the majority of these programs have modest rather than dramatic or life-changing impacts. A single, one-off program will not, on its own, be enough to make lasting population-level improvements or to transform the lives of vulnerable kids.

Even if we have good evidence, we frequently fail at implementing proven programs on a larger scale when we want to reach more families. Attracting and keeping the families most likely to benefit is also hard - families who need the programs the most are the least likely to participate and the most likely to drop out.

We need evidenced-based programs, tailored to the local context, but programs alone are not the answer.

There has also been a great deal of talk about the benefits of ‘joined-up’ services. Even though we know collaboration is needed, and we put it in our best practice guides, repeated inquiries find we don’t integrate well. The barriers are systemic - collaboration is driven at the agency-level not across the system, and depends on the individual people and relationships. The way services are set up, our funding and reporting rules, and our organisational and professional cultures,
FACT SHEET 5: Creating better systems and better chances

all get in the way and prevent us from really collaborating or integrating.

We don’t just need programs and better practice guidelines, we also need a policy response to change the way the system works. If we want to have a bigger, lasting impact, with fewer children slipping through the cracks, and to have a more sustainable way of doing things, we need to think about preventative systems - we need ‘systems thinking’.

What is systems thinking?
Systems thinking involves holistic approaches to problems – understanding how the whole system works rather than merely ‘joining up’ services. Systems thinking is a way of seeing things - a perspective of the bigger picture, the whole picture. Rather than thinking about just programs and clients, systems thinking considers all the aspects that impact the end outcomes. For example, the structure of service agencies, the nature of routine business, and established ways of thinking about roles or the causes of disadvantage all shape everyday practice on the ground and influence how practitioners work with families.

How do we create a better system?
To create a better system we need to think of the bigger picture, understand how systems work, and how they can be changed. We can design better systems by looking at the structures and processes that will best promote health and wellbeing, and drive the outcomes we really want. For example - designing systems that use data on what works, foster evidence-based ways of working, support sharing of information, promote wellbeing of children and reflect the ways families work. (See Factsheet 4 for the key features of better systems – intelligent, harmonised, flexible and responsive systems, grounded in shared principles.)

While the evidence supports these design features, there is no perfect, proven system - we are still learning about system dynamics and which models work best. We need to learn from those who have already taken the brave steps to transition to something better. While the evidence on the system is evolving, there is already compelling evidence that prevention and early intervention can be significantly more effective and cost less than trying to fix problems later. Crisis services will always be needed, but prevention is better than cure.

Prevention and early intervention systems need to leverage universal services like education and health services that all children and families will come in contact with. If proven programs and practices can be embedded in service systems and we leverage trusted services that reach everyone to be able to identify and respond early to problems, then we can strive for population-level impacts on child health and wellbeing.

Moving from rhetoric to practice
While systems change can seem ‘big’, we all need to be part of the solution. This is not something we should just expect governments to do. We need to advocate for, and be involved in, operationalising critical system components such as our shared end goals, our values, our ways of working and our use of evidence in decision making. System thinking is not easy to grasp and transitioning from the current systems to better ones has proven difficult for those who have attempted it so far. The Better Systems, Better Chances Report contains many examples and a range of approaches used elsewhere. We can, and should, learn from these experiences.