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| Understanding and planning guide |
| Family Preservation and Reunification Response  |
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# Purpose

This guide outlines the understanding and planning (assessment framework) components and domains relevant to the Family Preservation and Reunification Response (the Response). The aim is to support practitioners delivering the Response in understanding and planning activities with families. This includes Response Practitioners and Team Leaders, Child Protection Practitioners and Child Protection Navigators.

# How to use this guide

Continuous and interactive understanding and planning approaches are required throughout the Response to understand, address and effectively respond to the individual and holistic needs, risks and goals of children and families. Importantly, approaches are relational, engaging children and families in culturally safe, inclusive and meaningful ways, including through collaboration with important people and professionals involved with the family.

This framework is a guide that can be applied for the Response in alignment with the Relational Approach to Support. All assessment and planning approaches must align with the Best interests case practice model (BICPM), the Family Violence Multi-agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM) and information sharing schemes.

The rights, safety and best interests of children remains central to all understanding and planning approaches, including decision-making and actions. This is supported by regular engagement, information sharing and collaboration, joined up ways of working and the care team approach.

Understanding and planning approaches for the Response are described below and include core domains to support required information gathering and the development of formal and informal assessment, plans and reviews.

Assessment is ‘point in time’ and ‘builds’. The idea is to gather enough information to make decisions about planning and ensure children’s needs are clear and then add to it at reviews. The framework is not intended to be prescriptive. It is a guide and not all points in the Understanding Guide will apply to every family. Although the guidance needs to include the variety of needs families present with, practitioners will use professional judgement to assess and prioritise the most prominent issues for each family.

The department will continue to work with the sector to further progress the assessment framework and tools to be used across the Child and Family Service System, which align with Child and Family Reform and BICPM and are culturally safe and inclusive.

# Understanding and Planning for the Response

## Assessments with Aboriginal families

Ensuring a culturally safe and responsive assessment where Aboriginal self-determination is advanced will work to create the conditions for Aboriginal families to be safe, strong and together. Assessments with Aboriginal families must be strength-based and consider the best interests of the children while weighing the broader impact of colonisation and historical policies on Aboriginal families and communities. Children and family needs must be viewed individually, holistically, and as interrelated, not in isolation.

It is also important to seek from the family, their definition of who should be involved in particular assessments, services and planning activities, rather than practitioners making assumptions about who is ‘family’ or who forms ‘community’ for an Aboriginal child and family.

Further advice will be sought from Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations on other cultural considerations that should be included in the framework.

## Initial assessment

The initial assessment is completed as part of the connection process and incorporates information shared by the referrer and discussed at the connection meeting and first joint meeting with the family. It should include the pattern and history and current risks that have led to Child Protection involvement and therefore connection to the Response.

This assessment will reflect motivation for change, known barriers and resources which can be built upon in further assessments and planning, as well as worker safety and engagement considerations.

Fields for consideration include:

* current protective concerns/ and child protection involvement
* Child Protection and Service History (including Family and Care Services)
* current protective factors (including strengths/connection to culture, community and country)
* risk factors
* family’s readiness for engagement
* immediate safety goals
* cultural identity and needs

## Outcomes tools

Many service providers are using outcome tools and assessment scales, such as the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale (NCFAS), to support their monitoring of outcomes and inform assessments. These tools can be used by service providers to build practitioner understanding and to inform the comprehensive assessment of a family. Appendix 1 shows how this NCFAS scale aligns to the assessment domains outlined in this document.

Other tools developed specifically to measure Aboriginal child and family outcomes may be used by ACCOs for the Aboriginal Response to inform assessments and support monitoring and evaluation.

Additional assessment tools will be used as part of the evaluation. Service providers will be notified shortly of the implementation of these tools. The department will work with Aboriginal evaluators and ACCOs to modify tools or provide culturally appropriate tools and research methodology for Aboriginal children and families.

The Mobile Implementation Team will support organisations in using the tools.

Over time, and through learnings from the evaluation, the department will seek to introduce a common assessment scale that meets the needs of all families and is culturally safe for Aboriginal children and families.

## Risk

Risk should be continually assessed across the life of a case through professional judgement and not only at set assessment and review points. Child Protection case plans will guide safety and risk goals for families.

Should risk issues remain unchanged or escalate, the Response will seek advice and take any action required to ensure the safety of the children. This action may involve arranging an urgent Care Team meeting, including Child Protection. Where the case is not open with Child Protection the Response may consult with the Child Protection Navigator around risk.

## Documentation

While assessment is ongoing through the life of a case a ‘formal assessment’ is a written assessment that occurs at a point in time. Reviews are a form of formal assessment to continue to ensure that information is current and goals continue to be meaningful for families. Organisations implementing the Response can use their own assessment tools and processes provided they align with this guide.

Written assessments are also important for sharing information, particularly with Child Protection, in a succinct and clear way.

# Comprehensive Assessment

The comprehensive assessment should be completed in a relational way as the Response practitioner engages with the family. This should build upon the initial assessment and occur in consultation with current and previous service providers, including Child Protection. The comprehensive assessment should include:

## Family dynamics and functioning

* current composition, relationships and history of relationships and family functioning
* family stability, dynamics/atmosphere, clarity of roles, problems solving, including family violence
* family routines, guidance, boundaries, behavioural controls/management
* emotional connectedness, warmth, stability, emotional availability, attachment
* home environment – financial, physical and practical arrangements, housing, safety, organisation
* extended family and other family connections, including kinship
* spirituality and family cultural connections, including through language and to Country and community elders
* social and community connections and involvement
* conflict and communication styles
* role of non-residential parents, including involvement and relationship with children, co-parenting relationship, legal
* access to services

## Engagement and motivation for change

* previous engagement with services
* factors influencing current engagement

## Child Assessment (to be completed for each child)

### Safety and Permanency

* risk and parent’s ability to act protectively
* mental health safety
* access to housing and food, financial security
* connections, supports and attachments parent/caregiver, siblings and other family (as defined by the child)
* custody and contact with non-residential parent (if applicable)
* cultural safety and self determination

### Development and Wellbeing

* history of trauma (if present) and impact on child/young person, including family violence, cumulative harm, generational trauma
* identity and culture, including connection to mind, body and emotions
* age and stage of development, including developmental history and development milestones, emotional and behavioural development
* health, including birth history, medical history, physical development and health including nutrition, communications, disabilities
* presentation and behaviour, including mood and general presentation, self-care
* alcohol, drug and criminal/forensic history (young people)

### Social (including interview with the child)

* child’s presentation, behaviour, play and interactions with others
* social interactions and connections with peers at school, kinder or day care
* sports, activities and interests.

### Education and cognitive development

* cognitive development and learning needs, including learning difficulties special needs
* education, including engagement, behaviour, learning needs and involvement in schools/ecl.

## Parental / Carer Assessment

### Safety and Stability

* safety to self, including mental health, drugs and alcohol
* current risk and history of trauma, including family violence. forensic history, generational trauma or other trauma
* cultural safety and self determination.

### Development and Wellbeing

* history of trauma (if present) and impact, including family violence, cumulative harm, generational trauma
* culture and identity, including connection to mind, body and emotions
* cultural connections and spirituality
* health.

### Social and Community Supports

* presentation
* personal history including family of origin, care history, including stolen generations
* relationships, past and current
* networks, community connections and activities
* accessibility including access to transport.

### Education, work and economics

* work, income, and education
* ability to sustain housing, including current housing and history of housing/transience
* financial issues including, access to material aid, debt, gambling issues.

### Parenting capability and skills

* impact of parents’ assessment (above) on parenting/children, including consistently meeting and prioritising care, development and safety needs
* strengths, insight, goals, motivation for change
* parenting skills, including age appropriate guidance, boundaries and limits, discipline
* attitude towards child, attachment, emotional warmth and responsiveness.

# Child and family action plans

Child and family action plans should be developed with the child (where appropriate), young person and family and completed as part of the comprehensive assessment process with the family. Assessments will inform the development of a child and family action plan which will address the safety and developmental needs of each child and support needs of the family by identifying goals, expectations, roles, responsibilities and timelines for review.

Service Providers can use any format to record Child and Family Action Plans as long as it is able to:

* address the risk and vulnerability to maximise the safety and wellbeing of infants, children and young people
* appropriately reflect the needs and choices of the family
* identify the intended outcomes for each individual child in the family and parents / caregivers
* identify the roles and responsibilities of each person involved including children, parents / caregivers and other family members, Child Protection, the Response and other involved agencies.
* be provided to each person involved.

The Response practitioner will:

* ensure relevant information is shared with all involved in supporting the family in achieving the goals of the child and family action plan
* be informed by assessments
* complete plans in consultation with current and previous service providers, including Child Protection / ACAC
* ensure that each person involved in developing the plan fully understands its contents.

The child and family action plan is to be co-signed by the family and the Response practitioner.

# Assessment and planning reviews

Response practitioners will be constantly reviewing emerging and changing information and its impact on the family and their goals. In the context of this assessment framework a ‘review’ is a formal written review or ongoing assessment. Reviews completed with families are to be strengths based and trauma informed and should build upon previous assessments.

Service providers may use any format to conduct a formal review. All areas of the comprehensive assessment should be revisited with a view to adding only new information. New information will include both new assessment information and the family’s engagement in the service plan and progress to goals.

This is an opportunity to purposely check in with a family about how they are feeling about their experience and engagement with supports as well as their progress. Checking in with the family and tracking progress to goals together supports transition and exit planning early in the life of a case, limiting service dependence and empowering families to take ownership over their plans in a positive way.

Families accessing the Response are very vulnerable and children are at high risk of entering care or staying in care, this along with the programs intensive intervention means that information should be evolving rapidly. If progress is not occurring as expected this is equally important to be captured to ensure that children are receiving the most appropriate response to ensure their safety and wellbeing. Frequent review will assist to continually shape and modify service delivery to the needs of the family and to update the child and family action plan where required.

Regular reviews should occur in consultation with current and previous service providers and professionals, including Child Protection / ACAC. Written reviews and updated child and family action plans should be shared with Child Protection / ACAC when open.

# Appendix 1: North Carolina Family Assessment Scale mapping

\*This guide aims to help practitioners to use the NCFAS to inform their comprehensive assessments with families. Assessment is not always linear and therefore fields may fall into multiple assessment domains, including those not identified here. The most important aspect of assessment is the family’s story, the narrative will guide how you categorise information for the purpose of writing a clear and concise assessment.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| NCAFS Assessment Domain | NCAFS Assessment Field | FPRR Assessment Framework |
| Environment | Housing stability | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Education, work and economics
 |
| Safety in the community | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Social and community supports
 |
| Environmental risks | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Habitability of housing | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Personal hygiene | * Child: Development and wellbeing
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Learning environment | * Child: Development and wellbeing
* Child: Education and cognitive development
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Parental capabilities | Supervision of children | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Disciplinary practices | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Provision of developmental/ enrichment opportunities | * Child Social
* Child: Education and cognitive development
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Use of drugs/alcohol interferes with parentings | * Parent: Safety and stability
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Promotes children’s education | * Child: Education and cognitive development
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Controls access to media/reading materials | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Parent/carer literacy | * Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Family interactions | Bonding with children | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Communication with children | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Expectations of children | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Child: Development and wellbeing
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Mutual support within the family | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Parent: Social and community supports
 |
| Relationship between parents/care givers | * Family dynamics and functioning
 |
| Family routines/rituals | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Safety and stability
 |
| Family recreation and play activities | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Child: Safety and permanency
 |
| Family safety | Absence/presence of domestic violence between parentings/care givers | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Safety and stability
 |
| Absence/presence of other family conflict | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Safety and stability
 |
| Absence/presence of physical abuse of children | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Absence/presence of emotional abuse of children | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Absence/presence of sexual abuse of children | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Absence/presence of neglect of children | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Absence/presence of access to weapons | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Child wellbeing | Children’s behaviours | * Child: Development and wellbeing
* Child Social
 |
| School performance | * Child: Development and wellbeing
* Child: Education and cognitive development
 |
| Children’s relationship with parents/caregiver | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Child: Development and wellbeing
 |
| Children’s relationship with siblings | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Child: Development and wellbeing
 |
| Children’s relationship with peers | * Child: Development and wellbeing
* Child Social
 |
| Cooperation/motivation to maintain the family | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Engagement and motivation for change
* Child: Development and wellbeing
 |
| Social/community life | Social relationships | * Child Social
* Parent: Social and community supports
 |
| Relationships with child care, schools and extracurricular services | * Parent: Social and community supports
 |
| Connection to neighbourhood, cultural/ethnic community | * Child: Development and wellbeing
* Parent: Development and wellbeing
* Parent: Social and community supports
 |
| Connection to spiritual/religious community | * Child: Development and wellbeing
* Parent: Development and wellbeing
* Parent: Social and community supports
 |
| Parent/caregiver initiative and acceptance of available help/support | * Engagement and motivation for change
* Parent: Social and community supports
 |
| Self-sufficiency | Caregiver employment | * Parent: Education, work and economics
 |
| Family income | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Education, work and economics
 |
| Financial management | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Education, work and economics
 |
| Food/nutrition | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Child: Safety and permanency
* Child: Development and wellbeing
 |
| Transportation | * Parent: Social and community supports
 |
| Family health | Parent/caregiver physical health | * Child: Development and wellbeing
* Parent: Development and wellbeing
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Parent/caregiver disability | * Parent: Development and wellbeing
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Parent/caregiver mental health | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parent: Safety and stability
* Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Children physical health | * Child: Development and wellbeing
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Children disability | * Child: Development and wellbeing
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Children mental health | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Child: Development and wellbeing
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Family access to health/mental health | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Child: Development and wellbeing
* Parent: Safety and stability
* Parent: Development and wellbeing
* Parent: Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Caregiver/child ambivalence | Parent/caregiver ambivalence toward child | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Child: Safety and permanency
* Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Child ambivalence toward parent/carer | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Child: Safety and permanency
 |
| Ambivalence exhibited by substitute care provider | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Parent: Social and community supports
 |
| Disrupted attachment | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Child: Safety and permanency
* Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Pre-Reunification home visitations | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Child: Safety and permanency
* Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Readiness for reunification | Resolution of significant CPS risk factors | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Completion of case service plans | * Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Resolution of legal issues | * Child: Safety and permanency
* Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Parent/caregiver understanding of child treatment needs | * Family dynamics and functioning
* Child: Safety and permanency
* Parenting capability and skills
 |
| Established back-up supports and/or service plans | * Parent: Social and community supports
* Parenting capability and skills
 |

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| To receive this publication in an accessible format please email the Children, youth and families reform team <childrenyouthfamilies@dffh.vic.gov.au>. Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.© State of Victoria, Australia, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, November 2020.In this document, ‘Aboriginal’ refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. ‘Indigenous’ or ‘Koori/Koorie’ is retained when part of the title of a report, program or quotation.Available at the  Providers website <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/victorian-and-aboriginal-family-preservation-and-reunification-response> |