

Expenditure and outcomes in the Child Protection system. Let's discuss the reality.



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EVERY CONVERSATION MATTERS
SHIFTING CONVERSATION TO ACTION

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Presenters:

- Darian Brooker - Youth Advocate, Founder We, Future Leaders
- Mark Galvin - Lumenia, Expenditure Analysis and Investment Insights
- Professor Tim Moore - ACU Institute of Child Protection Studies, Deputy Director
- Tim Saunders - Head of Child Welfare, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

In this webinar on **Tuesday 11 July 2026** the speakers discussed:

- **Where child protection funding is going**, including the increasing cost of out-of-home care and the shift towards more intensive crisis responses.
- **The case for greater investment in prevention and early family support**, including evidence linking increased family support spending with fewer children entering care.
- **What better outcomes should look like for children and young people**, with a strong focus on relationships, stability, connection to family, community and culture, and ensuring lived experience informs decisions.
- **The limitations of current child protection data**, including differences between jurisdictions and gaps in capturing outcomes and lived experience.
- **The need for a broader whole-of-community response**, with health, education, early childhood and community services all playing a role in supporting families before they reach crisis

Overview

This webinar looked at whether Australia's increasing investment in child protection and out-of-home care is delivering better outcomes for children and families. Mark Galvin presented research showing that while expenditure has increased significantly, overall system responsiveness has declined, with more funding directed towards intensive and costly responses once families have reached crisis. The webinar also highlighted emerging

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evidence that earlier investment can make a difference, including analysis showing that a 10% increase in family support expenditure was associated with a 4% reduction in entries to care the following year.

The panel also discussed what better outcomes should look like for children, young people and families, including the importance of lived experience, connection to family, community and culture, and access to support before problems escalate. A strong theme throughout the discussion was that prevention cannot sit with the statutory child protection system alone. Better outcomes require sustained investment in accessible, family-centred supports and stronger coordination across health, education, community services and government.

Speaker quotes

- “I would like to see universal tailored family supports”, “I’d like to see a help sector, not a reporting-investigation sector.” - *Mark Galvin*
- “We can’t create a more sustainable system where we’re investing only after families reach crisis point.” - *Mark Galvin*
- “Some of our families tell us that the only way that they can get help is for crisis to occur. That’s not good enough.” - *Tim Moore*
- “Children in care say that the basic standard should be that life is better for me now that I’m in care than it was before.” *Tim Moore*
- “If a child comes away from care feeling unloved, then that’s systems neglect.” - *Tim Moore* (can combine w above)
- “The Child Protection National Minimum Data Set is just a minimum data set. It is not comprehensive... It’s not good at capturing outcomes, and it’s not good at capturing the lived experience of children and families as they go through the system.” — *Tim Saunders*
- “When we are thinking about prevention, intervention and response, we need to be thinking about the whole person and their whole experience—not just separate buckets of support.” - *Darian Brooker*
- “If we just listened and acted the first time, or earlier, we wouldn’t need to continue asking young people to retell their lived experience... It can be easy to get lost in the numbers and forget what we’re actually looking at this for: the actual experience and the people who are living it.” - *Darian Brooker*



Theme

The theme for National Child Protection Week (6 - 12 September 2026) is

Every Conversation Matters: Shifting Conversation to Action

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The following sheet provides links to resources and topics that were mentioned in the above webinar, to help us **shift this conversation into action**.

Recordings & Resource Sheets for the National Child Protection Week 2026 webinars will all be available on the [NAPCAN website](#).

Resources and links:

- An overview of the [Lumenia research](#) linking investment in early family supports with reduced entries into out-of-home care (OOHC) in the following year.
- Research examining the effectiveness of income support initiatives on child welfare outcomes: [Income Support Helps Families Meet Children's Needs and Reduces Child Welfare Involvement, Research From Multiple Programs Suggest](#)
- The [family connect and support evaluation](#), shared by a participant during the webinar, as a recent Australian example of evidence supporting investment in services for families.

Questions from the audience:

- **Q:** The NSW Family Connect and Support evaluation found that every \$1 invested generated between \$1.10 and \$4.90 in projected social returns, yet investment in early family support remains limited. How can we better mobilise this evidence, build coalitions and influence governments to shift more funding towards earlier support for families?
 - **A:** Thank you for your question, and for sharing the link to the Family Connect and Support evaluation which is a valuable contribution to the evidence base.

As you say, the barriers to change extend well beyond the availability of evidence. In my view, they reflect a combination of structural and political factors that include decades of investment at the tertiary end of the system which have built statutory infrastructure, a workforce, provider markets, funding arrangements and public expectations around crisis response.

Despite the evidence, I also think the benefits of earlier investment in families are often perceived as taking too long to materialise and the counterfactual is difficult to make visible. The reports, investigations and entries to care that are avoided, are much less tangible than the immediate and visible pressures within the statutory system.

In addition to the evidence more is needed to mobilise around a common cause and exert sustained pressure for change. There are many organisations and peaks advocating for change that present an opportunity to build

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coalitions around advocacy platforms. The Centre for Relational Care, Fams NSW and the Preventative Peaks Alliance in Queensland are some examples.

- **Q:** How does the National System Performance indicator account for differences in data collection across jurisdictions? Do these differences affect the validity of the measure?
 - **A:** Thank you for the question. It is a valid one, and I agree with the broader caution. As Tim Saunders and I noted during the webinar, the national data sets are not perfect, and differences between jurisdictions need to be interpreted carefully. However, in my opinion, the existence of data limitations should lead to better comparison, not no comparison.

The national data sets already invite comparison, often through the selective use of individual indicators and sometimes in ways that can be misleading or overlook the broader pattern of system performance. The index grew out of a need identified by stakeholders for a clearer, more balanced overall view of how child protection systems are performing.

There is a reasonable basis for doing this given all jurisdictions undertake broadly similar core child protection functions, and the AIHW's national minimum data collection uses nationally specified data items, definitions and counting rules across its key reporting areas. This does not eliminate jurisdictional differences, but it provides a common evidence base for cautious and structured comparison.

The index also applies a disciplined methodology to the available data. The underlying indicators and weightings were selected with stakeholder input to reflect different, material aspects of system performance, and each measure is standardised before being combined. The methodology includes explicit rules for managing missing or unavailable data, including the approach I mentioned that was used to address the missing Queensland data for 2025.

The purpose of the index is to bring together the available evidence transparently and identify patterns that might otherwise be missed. It can help to identify where more detailed examination is warranted, using the underlying data alongside jurisdictional context and qualitative evidence. Importantly, it can be unpacked by jurisdiction, indicator group and individual indicator, facilitating further inquiry into what may be driving an overall result at a more granular level.

There is a useful parallel with the United Nations Human Development Index. UNDP is explicit that the HDI is not a comprehensive measure of human

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development and should be supplemented by other indicators. Its value is not that it resolves every measurement problem but that it provides a transparent, accessible headline measure that directs attention to the components and questions requiring closer examination.

The UN article on what the Human Development Index is, and is not, may be of interest:

<https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-index-what-it-and-what-it-not>

- **Q:** What is included in the 'care services' category on the '*Spending has shifted...*' slide, and what is included in the other expenditure categories?
 - **A:** Thanks for the question, the Productivity Commission's explanatory notes state that Care Services covers children in out-of-home care and children in other supported placements. Other tables that break down out-of-home care indicate that it includes Residential care, Foster care, Relative/kinship care, other home-based care, Independent living and Other categories. Tim Saunders may be able to confirm and/or provide further details.

Social media tiles from the webinar are available on our [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#) or [Instagram](#)

For more information, contact:

NAPCAN Campaigns and Communications Manager, Clare Walker

clare.walker@napcan.org.au



Thank you for your commitment to ensuring every child in every community has a fair go.

Child Protection Week 2026, 6-12 September

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