



ARACY

Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth

Collaboration • Evidence • Prevention

Submission to the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

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Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth

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About this Submission

This submission from the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth refers specifically to the Commission of Inquiry's aim of examining the effectiveness of the current child protection system and whether the current use of resources is adequate or could be used more efficiently.

About ARACY

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) is a national non-profit organisation of more than 2000 members (organisations and individuals), working to create better futures for Australia's children and young people.

ARACY's vision is a future in which Australia's children and young people thrive and their wellbeing is a national priority.

ARACY's purpose is to improve the wellbeing of children and young people, by advancing collaboration and evidence-based action.

To achieve this, we need to fill in the gaps in current knowledge about the complex issues facing children and young people as well as translate existing knowledge and evidence of 'what works' into practice and policy. ARACY provides neutral space for stimulating and facilitating national collaborative efforts to do this.

ARACY is building and supporting collaborations of researchers, policy makers and practitioners across disciplines, to share knowledge and foster new ways of thinking and working. Through these collaborations, and by translating the best evidence into policy and practice, ARACY is helping to prevent problems before they arise, and enhancing the wellbeing of future generations.



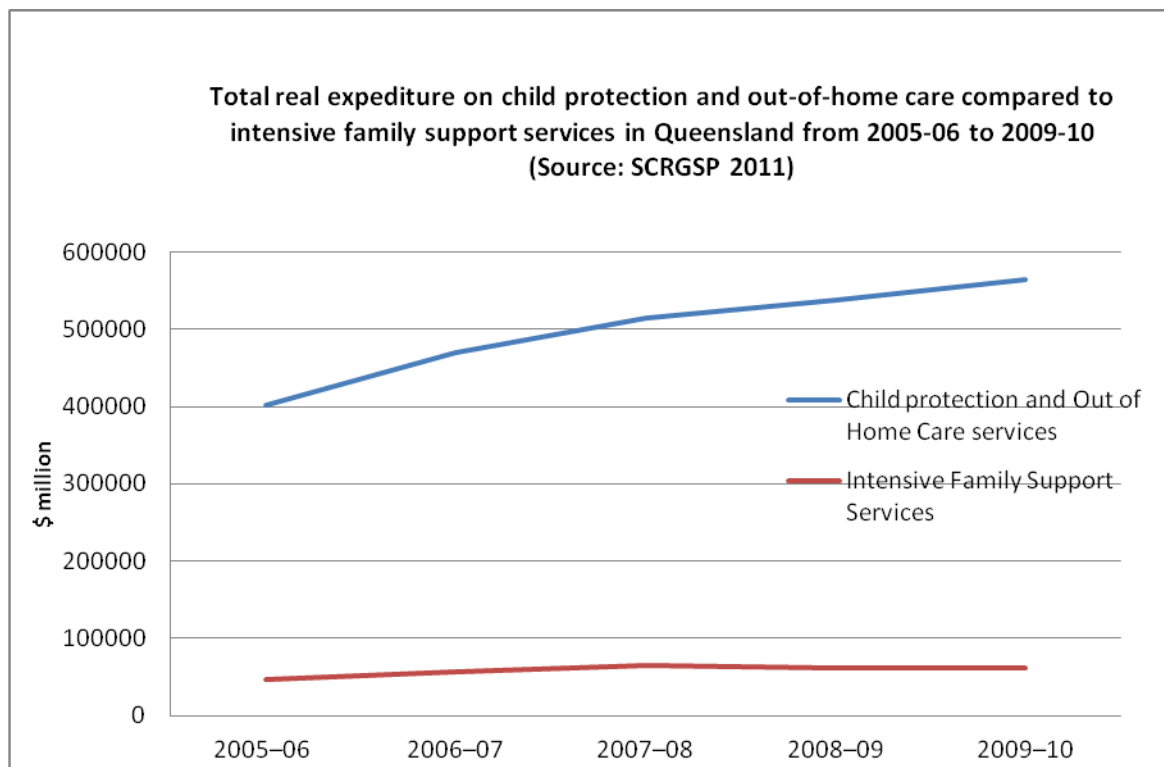
ARACY's membership includes leaders in a broad range of areas such as early childhood and adolescent development, psychology, paediatrics, epidemiology, education, justice, the social sciences, population statistics, and economics, with top-level policy makers and service providers.

Examining the effectiveness of the Child Protection System

In 2008, ARACY published the report *Inverting the Pyramid – Enhancing systems for protecting children*. The full report can be accessed [here](#). The key summary points of this report were:

- To apply a public health model to the child protection system, which would shift child protection systems to a more preventive and collaborative model by accessing three levels of prevention: primary, secondary and tertiary.
- To address the wicked problem of child protection with collaborative (rather than the current authoritarian) approaches that will enhance both policy making and service delivery.
- To shift the focus of effort from being primarily focussed on protection to a focus on prevention.

As can be seen in the figure below, while spending on Intensive Family Support Services in Queensland remains steady, and low, funding for Child Protection and Out of Home Care continue to increase, with the spend on IFSS now only one-tenth of the spend on protection activities.



A preventive model for protecting children requires a supportive culture. This is a culture that is embodied by:

- collaboration between organisations and services
- mutual respect and trust between professional groups and providers
- shared responsibility for vulnerable families and children rather than risk aversion
- focus on the needs of the child and working with — rather than on — families.



Enhancing the work of practitioners – The Common Approach

The current ARACY project, the Common Approach to Assessment, Referral and Support (CAARS) was a direct outcome of the *Inverting the Pyramid* report. CAARS focuses on improving collaboration between practitioners working with families, improving practitioners' perceptions of their role and capability in a prevention role and shifting practitioners to a more holistic view of families, rather than a problem – solution approach.

The independent evaluation of CAARS identified that an effective implementation, including systems analysis and mapping, training and support is necessary to achieve vital cultural change and a shift to a prevention focus. The formative evaluation strongly demonstrated that using CAARS improves engagement between clients and practitioners. A wide range of evidence shows that improving communication and connectedness between practitioner and client can improve client satisfaction with the engagement, and outcomes for the client. Research¹ shows that the elements of an effective practitioner/client relationship are:

- Understanding
- Collaboration
- Commitment
- Communication
- Empowerment
- Time

The formative evaluation demonstrated that CAARS enhances all of these elements. The formative evaluation showed that for clients, engaging in a CAARS conversation helped them to feel more **empowered** about making changes than “tick a box” assessment tools, which

¹ Deep Value: A Literature Review of the Role of Effective Relationships in Public Services
Matthew Smerdon Kate Bell.(2011)



can leave families feeling disempowered, and that this empowerment also lead to greater **commitment** to make change.

ARACY has begun discussions with the QLD Government about how CAARS could enhance the work of practitioners in first contact with Queensland's children, and how a full implementation could help these organisations shift to a collaborative culture. We strongly recommend a whole of Government approach to redesigning the system with a focus on prevention and early intervention, which includes extensive training and support for first contact practitioners.

CAARS has the potential to **complement** the Queensland Child Protection Guide, by providing a visual tool to prompt discussion with children and families about current strengths and needs, which will further enhance practitioners' capacity to make more appropriate referrals. In addition, CAARS has the potential to **extend** the capacity of practitioners to work with families before problems turn to crises, and refer families with early and emerging problems to services that can help.

Speaking a Common Language

What is clear from the latest issues paper is that a co-ordinated approach is required. During the formative evaluation and the recent implementation of CAARS into FMHSS services, practitioners spoke of the need for a common language for all those in contact with children and families. Practitioners spoke of different services within one organisation who have to use the different "languages" of the services they are providing, which leaves both families and practitioners confused, and services often disjointed. A major benefit of CAARS is that it establishes and reinforces a common language among all service providers, so that families receive consistent care and servicing, and practitioners can better use referral information to enhance service delivery.

Summary

Queensland is faced with a major crisis in the child protection system which can only be addressed by meeting the needs of families before problems escalate into crises. Attention



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must be given to families showing the early signs of needing help, rather than focusing primarily on families with major and complex needs. By implementing a common approach such as CAARS to working with families, collaboration between services will increase, leading to better servicing of clients and better outcomes for families.



Shifting the Focus – investing in early intervention

Queensland has taken some steps to increasing funding for early intervention programs. The Helping Out Families program goes some of the way to bridging the gap for families who are referred by Child Safety Services as having needs but not meeting the criteria for Child Safety. ARACY would encourage the continued trial and scale-up of this program, and would encourage the use of CAARS in these services to ensure that:

- A child-focussed view of family life is explored and understood;
- Strengths of the family are identified, celebrated and utilised;
- Non-traditional referral pathways are used alongside more formal referrals to secondary services. By using non-traditional pathways (such as a school breakfast program, a sporting team etc) a child and family's community connectedness is enhanced, needs can be addressed and the capacity of the family is enhanced, without further burdening the secondary system.

In addition, ARACY recommends that a similar program be rolled out to families who have needs identified by other practitioners. One factor driving the over-reporting of families to Child Safety Services is that practitioners have identified that this may be the only way a family can receive some services. If a visible referral pathway and assistance is available to families, and practitioners (such as GPs and teachers) are aware of it, then this has the potential to reduce the number of inappropriate referrals to Child Safety Services. A key factor in this program would be training and support to enhance the skills of these practitioners in engaging with families early.