

FAMILY CONNECT AND SUPPORT PROGRAM EVALUATION

DCJ response to the Recommendations

Early Intervention – Evidence and Strategy

May 2025

An independent evaluation of the Family Connect and Support (FCS) program conducted by the Research Centre for Children and Families (RCCF) in partnership with Curiyo was completed in December 2024.

The evaluation had three components:

1. Process evaluation - to understand how well the program is designed and implemented to achieve client outcomes;
2. Outcomes evaluation - to understand the outcomes the FCS program has achieved for clients; and
3. Economic evaluation, to understand whether the benefits for FCS clients outweigh program costs.

The FCS evaluation found the program is associated with positive outcomes, with evidence of avoided statutory child protection involvement for families who engage with FCS and exit with needs met, in comparison to those who exited without their needs met.

The evaluation provided a list of 20 recommendations, which DCJ has used to inform program design, delivery and improvement.

For enquiries please contact: familyconnectandsupport@dcj.nsw.gov.au



01

FCS Recommendation

Collect client satisfaction data independently rather than having FCS workers collect this data.

SUPPORTED

Context

The client survey could be replaced with a brief survey that is sent to families via phone or email and collected through a survey database. This would avoid social desirability bias in how client satisfaction is collected.

DCJ response

DCJ is developing a client experience survey. The survey will cover various client satisfaction domains that are important to clients, service providers and DCJ. Survey responses can be used to improve service delivery. DCJ is exploring options for the survey to be collected independently of service providers.



02

FCS Recommendation

Select a set of priority measures for baseline data collection and follow-up.

SUPPORTED

Context

FCS providers should collect the same data on a set of standard questions, aligned with the NSW Human Services Outcomes Framework, before the intervention starts and at follow-up during the intervention and at service completion.

DCJ response

As part of the new Community and Family Support Program commencing 1 January 2026, service providers delivering services under the FCS program activity will be required to report on outcomes through the use of the program's Standard Client and Community Outcomes Reporting. Insights gained from the FCS evaluation will be utilised to determine the most important domains to report on in the FCS program activity.



03

FCS Recommendation

Collect more detailed and varied data on priority cohorts.

SUPPORTED

Context

In addition to the current priority cohorts (Aboriginal families; families with children aged 0-5 years; and children and young people affected by mental illness), data collection fields could be added to track other potential cohorts including families experiencing domestic and family violence, drug and alcohol misuse, homelessness, unemployment, parental mental health issues and parental and child disability.

DCJ response

A number of the highlighted data collection points are already collected in the Data Exchange (DEX), including in demographic and reasons for seeking assistance data. The program area will be focusing on strengthening guidance and communications to ensure providers understand how to utilise DEX for reporting on domestic and family violence.

Note, a key principle of the program's data collection approach is to balance data collection with client need and service delivery. Every data collection point needs to be considered within the context of how/if it will be used and if it is necessary.

Additionally, the Early Intervention Common Assessment Tool allows FCS service providers to collect a range of information from families relating to their circumstances.



04

FCS Recommendation

Record data about families' needs.

SUPPORTED

Context

Adding a data collection field for FCS providers to indicate whether the program is positioned to meet families' assessed needs would provide information on the types of families' needs that are not the right fit for FCS and may need a different type of response (e.g., statutory).

DCJ response

The Early Intervention Common Assessment Tool is designed for FCS practitioners to conduct comprehensive assessments with families and help inform what supports are needed for families. This common assessment tool should increase consistency in intake, assessment and triage for families.



05

**FCS
Recommendation**

Require consistent DEX data entry.

SUPPORTED

Context

Consistent data collection and reporting will support future monitoring and evaluation efforts, as underreporting in the data collected to date on FCS may have resulted in an underestimation of the effectiveness of the program. Data entry should also indicate when core casework has ended and a period of follow up has begun, in order to identify cases that have truly closed.

DCJ response

Work is already underway to improve data collection using the insights from this evaluation, including a Data Quality Improvement Strategy. The program's Data Collection and Reporting Guide is also being updated.



06

**FCS
Recommendation**

Change how data is collected on cultural diversity.

SUPPORTED

Context

FCS program data records clients as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) if they speak a language other than English as their main language in their home, or if they were born in another country. Instead of only these current measures, consideration should be given to including several other measures, including parents' countries of birth, year of arrival in Australia and first language spoken, as well as language spoken in the home and country of birth.

DCJ response

The program area has commenced conversations with the Department of Social Services Data Exchange about the metrics available to capture CALD data more accurately. Following a decision, the program area will amend the program's Data Collection and Reporting Guide.



07

FCS Recommendation

Record information on services provided to families and link to child protection records.

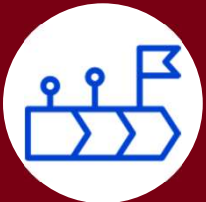
SUPPORTED

Context

A major complication in this evaluation was the inability to observe which clients had also received services through the Family Referral Service program, which ended in January 2021. Going forward, it is critical that all FCS agencies collect data on all cases they serve, to allow for robust evaluation of program outcomes.

DCJ response

This recommendation is linked to the previous recommendation about FCS providers consistently collecting individual client data. It relates to the previous Family Referral Service program and the inability of evaluators to link to that dataset. This should be resolved moving forward given all FCS providers are now reporting administrative data through the Department of Social Services Data Exchange. The FCS program is linked to DCJ administrative data as well as to the Human Services Dataset (HSDS). This will enable future evaluations to see service usage of FCS clients across the NSW service system, provided the other services are linked to the HSDS.



08

FCS Recommendation

Allow for a longer follow-up period for evaluation.

SUPPORTED

Context

In this evaluation, clients in FCS could only be reliably followed from February 2022 and follow-up data in the statutory child protection system is only available until late 2023, so FCS clients could only be observed for 6-18 months. For future evaluations, it is recommended that cohorts of clients be observed for more than one year and ideally for two years or more.

DCJ response

This recommendation refers to how long the program was running before its evaluation. Future evaluations will have more time and subsequently more data, and higher quality data to inform the evaluation.



09

FCS Recommendation

Roll out new programs in ways that enable robust evaluation through randomly assigning people to treatment/control groups and bring evaluators into the program design and rollout phase.

**PARTIALLY
SUPPORTED**

Context

Before fully implementing new social programs like FCS, consideration should be given to rolling out programs in a way that enables conducting randomised control trials, with some families randomly assigned to treatment and others (initially) as controls, to be able to measure the true impact of the program. Bringing in evaluators early can help facilitate this.

DCJ response

DCJ supports rigorous evaluation methods and is working to ensure evaluation is considered in the design and rollout of programs.

DCJ does not support random assignment of people to treatment or control groups on ethical grounds.



10

FCS Recommendation

Advocate for greater investment in early intervention.

SUPPORTED

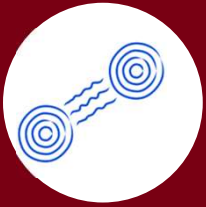
Context

Across NSW, there is an inadequate supply of services with sufficient intensity and expertise for families who are not allocated for statutory child protection intervention but have children at a high level of risk. Consistently identified service gaps include housing, mental health services, domestic and family violence services, intensive family case management, paediatric and allied health for children including speech therapy, and clinical assessments for neurodevelopmental conditions (e.g., autism spectrum disorder). Greater investment in early intervention services is needed.

DCJ response

The 2024/25 NSW Budget provided \$192.3 million for Targeted Earlier Intervention and \$21.6 million for Family Connect Support services delivering a range of prevention and early intervention services that strengthen families and communities.

DCJ's early intervention programs offer early help and support, at the point where they can have the most impact, early in life and early in need.



11

**FCS
Recommendation**

Develop culturally appropriate referral pathways.

SUPPORTED

Context

Referral pathways between Aboriginal and CALD services could be strengthened, to facilitate more collaborative work between FCS and Aboriginal and multicultural services, including case conferencing meetings to enable collaboration in supporting families.

DCJ response

Preliminary work has been undertaken with Child Wellbeing Units (CWU) and FCS service providers to strengthen referral pathway. Cultural safety is a focus of the new program specifications including as a service system outcome and program requirement.



12

**FCS
Recommendation**

Engage early with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to support families.

SUPPORTED

Context

In the consultations with ACCOs, stakeholders expressed that Aboriginal families may avoid FCS providers because they are funded by DCJ, due to fears about statutory child protection. Early engagement with Aboriginal organisations can help to build trust with Aboriginal families.

DCJ response

DCJ is committed to working together with FCS service providers and the ACCO sector to ensure cultural safety for Aboriginal families accessing FCS services. The updated Program Specifications also provide guidance on strengthening cultural safety in the program.



13

**FCS
Recommendation**

Ensure FCS staff practice in ways that are culturally aware and responsive in their staff management and collaborations.

SUPPORTED

Context

Aboriginal services reported that FCS agencies that had Aboriginal staff were observed to be appreciative of the community obligations for Aboriginal people and the importance of cultural sensitivity and safety when working with Aboriginal families. However, Aboriginal services expressed concerns that when only one Aboriginal worker was employed within a FCS service, they needed support to avoid burn out.

DCJ response

Cultural safety is a focus of the updated Program Specifications including as a service system outcome and program requirement. A cultural safety program logic has been provided in the Program Specifications and it is expected that service providers will embed the principles into their service design and delivery. Annual reviews of FCS service providers will help to ensure these principles are being adopted by service providers.



14

**FCS
Recommendation**

Review Aboriginal Participation Plans.

SUPPORTED

Context

Aboriginal Participation Plans (APPs) should be reviewed to verify they are based on authentic relationships with ACCOs and that FCS providers are taking the appropriate actions to implement them. A lack of proactive engagement with Aboriginal services may result in the escalation of family issues and lead to a higher risk of the Aboriginal child entering the statutory child protection system.

DCJ response

Following a review of Aboriginal Participation Plans and how best to align them to the new Community and Family Support program, the requirement for Aboriginal Participation Plans will be removed and replaced by CFS cultural safety mechanisms including ACMP, alignment to cultural safety program logic and program requirement.



15

FCS Recommendation

Build and maintain relationships and partnerships with a range of service providers.

SUPPORTED

Context

Relationships within local services are important across FCS regions to foster an effective inbound and outbound referral system. Strategies to build connections include attendance at inter-agency meetings, organising and attending community events, and undertaking targeted visits to universal settings such as early childhood centres.

DCJ response

The program area already works with FCS providers through the bi-annual strengthening referral pathways workshops and FCS additionally hold a bi-monthly Community of Practice. The cross-agency committee that DCJ, the CWUs and some FCS providers participate in can be used as a forum to explore this work further.

The updated Program Specifications include a service system and program requirement that encourages program referral pathways and sector collaboration.



FCS Recommendation

Allocate higher priority to FCS referrals (for services such as Family Preservation).

16

**NOT
SUPPORTED**

Context

FCS providers are assessed as 'community referrals' as compared to statutory referrals made by DCJ staff, who can refer families to services such as fee-free psychology services or intensive family support services. Given the risk that is held by FCS providers and the importance of FCS as an outbound referral service for families reported to the Child Protection Helpline, it should be considered whether at least a portion of FCS referrals can be classified at the same level as DCJ statutory referrals.

DCJ response

Under the *Children and Young Person (Care and Protection) Act 1998 (the Care Act)*, mandatory reporters are required to report to the Helpline where they suspect a child or young person is at risk of significant harm. On receipt of a report, DCJ is then required to determine what response is required, if any, to keep the child or young person safe. If a Mandatory Reporter does not suspect a child or young person is at risk of significant harm, they should not report them to the Helpline.

As outlined in *Finalising the Family Preservation* foundational elements, DCJ is redesigning the Family Preservation program so it is better targeted to families with children at risk of significant harm, who are at risk of being removed into out-of-home care. As the most intensive and holistic service offering in the system, and as a highly rationed service, DCJ is prioritising Family Preservation to families where a child is most at risk of harm and being removed – that is, those in contact with DCJ. While 90% of referrals to Family Preservation are prioritised for DCJ, 10% of referrals are prioritised for the community, including Family Connect and Support and Targeted Earlier Intervention service providers. Those providers will be able to refer families to Family Preservation where they suspect the child or young person is at risk of significant harm.



FCS Recommendation

Consider longer timeframes for some cases.

17

SUPPORTED

Context

The standard 16-week service delivery period can be too short when there are long wait times for referrals or for families with particularly complex needs. A set of criteria could be developed for flagging families who may benefit from additional FCS support. Longer timeframes to enable active holding may also be required in more rural areas due to limited services.

DCJ response

The updated Program Specifications for the new Community and Family Support program, specify that services being delivered under the FCS program activity should work with families for no longer than 16 weeks, although this will be driven by the family's needs. The maximum period of FCS service delivery is six months from the time the referral is received. When required, a family can be re-referred to FCS following approval by the DCJ contract manager for a case extension. There is no limit on the number of re-referrals to an FCS service provider. This provides a more flexible timeframe for service provision than the previous program specifications.



FCS Recommendation

Support FCS staff to maintain and develop specific skills.

18

SUPPORTED

Context

Evaluation of the FCS model's implementation identified a core set of skills as essential, including active listening, clear and appropriate communication, demonstrating empathy, adopting a trauma-informed approach and being honest and transparent. It is important for FCS programs to keep these skills in mind for hiring new staff and professional development.

DCJ response

DCJ supports and promotes access to free or low-cost training for FCS service providers. DCJ delivers the Change Together learning program for non-government organisations, which TEI and FCS service providers can access. This program helps practitioners to develop key skills in child protection, sharing information, the NSW Practice Framework, and strengthening partnerships across the sector.



19

**FCS
Recommendation**

Raise awareness of FCS through social media and community promotion.

SUPPORTED

Context

Opportunities for greater promotion of FCS within local communities could include distributing brochures to universal settings (e.g., childcare centres, schools) as well as posting to social media and community bulletin boards with simple and clear messages about the voluntary assistance provided by FCS, so families can self-refer if needed.

DCJ response

Work is being undertaken with the communication branch within DCJ to raise awareness of the new Community and Family Support program, that FCS will be a part of from 2026.



20

**FCS
Recommendation**

Celebrate and reward the best performing service providers.

**PARTIALLY
SUPPORTED**

Context

This evaluation revealed that there was great variety across providers in terms of average cost per case, average time spent on cases and clients, and referrals made to external organisations and service providers. High performing providers should be celebrated by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice and performance and incentive payments should be considered.

DCJ response

DCJ supports acknowledgement of best practice within FCS service provision.

DCJ does not support rewarding FCS service providers with incentive payments.