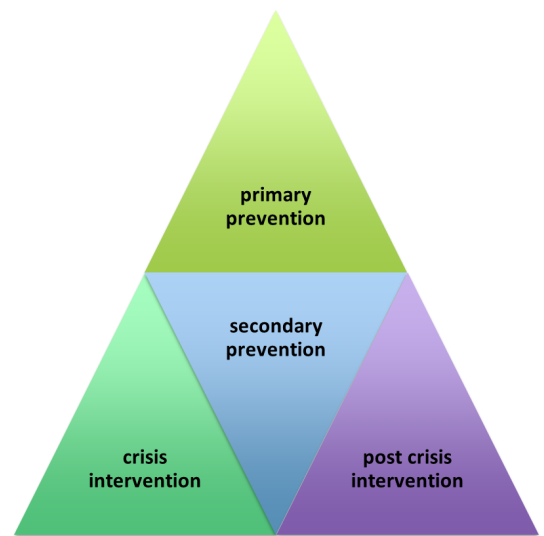


# Integrated Responses to Vulnerable Children: Forum Summary

On 24 March 2015, 90 workers from across the Northern Metropolitan Region participated in a forum on how the integrated family violence system can better respond to vulnerable children.

Attendees heard from Professor Cathy Humphreys and a panel of children's family violence specialists from Anglicare, Berry Street and Bright Futures.

Prof. Humphreys highlighted that the four parts of the 'intervention triangle' (pictured right) would be equal in a system that was 'fit-for-purpose'. Currently, the family violence system is necessarily weighted towards crisis intervention. This means that other areas are not given the attention needed to prevent and reduce the impact of family violence.



(Desmond, 2011)

The needs of children, in particular, can often be overlooked when the emphasis is on responding to crises.

## Children as clients with their own needs

*“When we’re working with the community of adults, we can forget the child’s voice.”*  
- Emma Toone, Berry Street

We should **speak directly** to children, with **respect**, and **acknowledge the impact** the violence has had on them. Using this approach, we can empower children to **describe what they need** in order to feel safe and supported. Conversations should include the **child's interests, hopes and dreams**.

We can create **child-friendly spaces**, including by providing low chairs and toys. We can create **‘welcome packs’** for children to involve them and demonstrate they are involved and important.

We must acknowledge that family violence **attacks and undermines the mother-child bond**. We should allow time for the **child’s relationship with their mother** to be explored and strengthened.

## A focus on perpetrator/father accountability

*“There is no such thing as a bad partner, but a good father.”*  
- Prof. Cathy Humphreys, University of Melbourne

We need to make **perpetrators/fathers visible** and hold them **accountable**.

Many children are in continued contact with their fathers, including through court-ordered visitation. Even if children are not in contact with their fathers, their fathers are **‘always in the room’** when we are working with children—he is an ‘absent presence’.

We can use narrative therapy and ‘double stories’ so that child gains a sense that, **even though dad is unsafe, the child is loved and lovable**.

# Integrated Responses to Vulnerable Children

## Integration is difficult, but necessary

*“Multi-agency working is hard, but it’s better than not doing it.”*

- Prof. Cathy Humphreys, University of Melbourne

We tend to see clients as being defined by the divisions in the service system. As Prof. Humphreys described, “everything about the way we work draws us back into **silos**”.

Different parts of the system have **different histories and paradigms**. For example, the child protection system was set up to respond to neglect and abuse, not family violence, and women’s family violence services are often not resourced to support children.

While mental health and drug and alcohol issues co-occur with family violence, **family violence needs to be acknowledged as a primary issue** across the whole service system.



Find resources for working with children on the NIFVS website: [nifvs.org.au/resources/children/](http://nifvs.org.au/resources/children/)

## Moving forward: what integrated responses to children might look like

*“We need to see children as clients of the service system, as a whole.”*

- Allen Jeffress, Bright Futures

In an integrated system, there will be ‘**no wrong door**’ for children. We can call colleagues for advice around particular practice issues—but we should also be brave in acknowledging children in our own work.

**The safety of women and children is inextricably linked.** Women’s and children’s pathways through the system should therefore be linked. An integrated system may employ a ‘**differential response**’, in which intake is streamlined and responses are relevant to the case.

Options for **keeping women and children safe in their homes** need to be further explored and strengthened. As Prof. Humphreys notes, “children aren’t safer if they’re homeless”.

Ultimately, Prof. Humphreys suggests that we will need to ask ourselves, “**if we redesigned the system, how would we do it so the intervention triangle looked more like the fit-for-purpose one?**”

### References

Desmond, K. (2011) *Filling the Gap: Integrated Post Crisis Response for Women And Children who have Experienced Family Violence*, Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service and McAuley Community Services for Women. Retrieved online: <http://www.goodshepvic.org.au/>



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