

FAMILIES WITH MULTIPLE AND COMPLEX NEEDS



In this tool, you will find:

- » An overview of the challenges families with multiple and complex needs face
- » Advice on 'what works' in supporting families with multiple and complex needs
- » Links to additional resources

Related Tools:

- » Creating Collaborative and Sustainable Partnerships and Networks
- » Cultural Competency
- » Cultural Safety and Responsiveness
- » Cultural Governance
- » Strengths-Based Approaches

KEY GUIDANCE

Background

Many families who seek support from child and family support services experience multiple, complex challenges. These might include mental health challenges, physical health difficulties, disability, substance use, health problems, family violence, incarceration, poverty, isolation, unemployment and homelessness. Sometimes these challenges are inter-generational, with parents and children experiencing and feeling the effects of generations of unemployment, disadvantage and trauma. Aboriginal families may also have experienced racism and discrimination and continue to experience the impacts of colonisation and forced removal from their families, country and culture.

Often the problems families present with are symptoms of other difficulties that need to be resolved if the best solutions are to be found. For example, a homeless family might need accommodation but, as importantly, parents might need help to manage unresolved trauma or ongoing mental health issues if housing is to be sustained. As such, services working with families need to appreciate the nature and breadth of the challenges families face and work with other support services to help families get assistance in complementary and coordinated ways.

Understanding how these challenges interact can be valuable not only for services but also for families themselves. Families are not always aware of the reasons that have led to their problems or difficulties or how their environments are hindering their progress. As a result, many parents and families experience significant shame and believe they are solely responsible for their difficulties, rather than realising there are some factors outside of their control.

Some families are often reluctant to admit they need help for fear of stigma. Many family members may also find it hard to trust services because they have had bad experiences in the past, or because they fear there might be repercussions of seeking help, for example fearing child removal.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR CaFIS PROVIDERS

This section outlines some considerations for CaFIS providers in working with multiple and complex needs.

Trustworthy relationships

Families with multiple and complex needs engage best when they have trustworthy and dependable relationships with workers who understand their needs. The worker is someone the family feels they can rely on and is empathetic and transparent and is able to demonstrate they can help the family to access the supports they need. Staff who have positive relationships with families should consider ways they can use these relationships to broaden the family's network so families don't become reliant on individuals.

Thorough needs assessment

Services need to develop a deep understanding of the challenges families with multiple and complex needs face, in order to assist them. They also need to explore the past and ongoing risk and protective factors for the family, and the formal and informal supports that are available to each family member. Thorough assessments which engage individual family members and families as a whole can help to comprehensively capture their needs, goals and aspirations.

Voice and choice

Individuals and families are more likely to engage with services if they feel they have been listened to, their wishes are respected and they have lots of opportunities to make decisions about what supports are provided, how they are assisted and how they will work together with the service.

Collaboration

Often the multiple and complex needs of families cannot be met by individual workers or services. Collaborative practice that is underpinned by agreed ways of working, shared needs assessments, case planning and review can help ensure families' needs can be met. When looking at who might best assist families, workers should consider what informal networks and supports might also be drawn on. This is particularly important as informal supports are often more enduring, more accessible and less stigmatising than formal service provision (see CaFIS tool *Creating Collaborative and Sustainable Partnerships and Networks*).

Culturally safe and competent

Families are more likely to engage and stay connected to services and supports when they have respect for and build on the values, preferences, beliefs, culture, and identity of the family, and their community (see CaFIS tools *Cultural Competency*, *Cultural Safety and Responsiveness* and *Cultural Governance*).

Strengths-based approaches

Families often feel disempowered by the challenges they have encountered and the problems they continue to face. Families with multiple and complex needs are more likely to engage with services when the services build on their strengths and help them to achieve their goals (see CaFIS tool *Strengths-Based Approaches*).

Timeliness

Families with multiple and complex needs are not always willing or able to receive support. Preferably, assistance is available as soon as families are ready or services engage in 'assertive holding' whereby services actively stay in touch with families while on waiting lists or as they consider what supports they are willing to receive.

Where to go for more information on this topic

There are some helpful resources available for supporting families experiencing different types of challenges. Some practical guides are included here.

Working with families with multiple and complex needs

- » Australian Institute of Family Studies Families with multiple and complex needs | (aifs.gov.au)
- » Australian Institute of Family Studies (2010) Issues for the safety and wellbeing of children in families with multiple and complex problems: The co-occurrence of domestic violence, parental substance misuse, and mental health problems
- » Emerging Minds (2019) Supporting children in families with complex needs

Alcohol and other drug use

- » Emerging Minds (2019) Parental substance use and child-focused practice
- » Crane, P., Moore, T., O'Regan, M., Davidson, D., Francis, C. and Davis, C. 2016. Youth alcohol and drug practice guide 5: Working with families and significant others. Brisbane. Dovetail.

Disability and Caring

- » Australian Institute of Family Studies (nd) Caring for families caring for a person with a disability
- » Australian Institute of Family Studies (2020) Practices that support parenting by parents with intellectual disability

Family and Domestic Violence

- » Heward-Belle, S., Healey, L., Isobel, J., Roumeliotis, A., Links, Erin, Mandel, D., Tsantfski, M. & Young, A., & Humphreys, C. (2020). Working at the intersections of domestic and family violence, parental substance misuse and/or mental health issues. Practice Guide from the STACY Project: Safe & Together Addressing Complexity.
- » Australian Centre for Child Protection (2020) Slow down and listen: Improving children's and young people's safety during periods of violence, separation and reunification
- » Practice Guide: Working at the intersections of domestic and family violence, parental substance misuse and/or mental health issues
- » Victorian DFFH Family Violence Multi Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework: Practice Guides

Homelessness

- » Australian Institute of Family Studies (2021) Families and homelessness: Supporting parents and improving outcomes for children
- » Institute of Child Protection Studies (2009) Kids Central Toolkit

Mental illness

- » Children of Parents with a Mental Illness <https://www.copmi.net.au/>
- » COPMI Principles and Actions for Services and People working with children of Parents with a Mental Illness
- » PSP Learning Hub Talking With Parents Experiencing Mental Health Issues

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