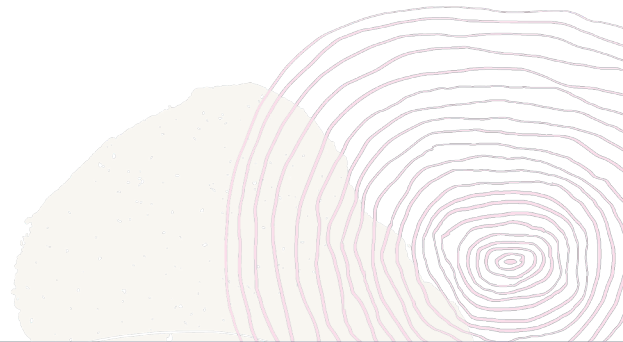




South Australian Royal Commission into Domestic, Family & Sexual Violence

Brave Foundation Submission
October 2024





Brave Foundation respectfully acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which our organisation is located and where we deliver our support programs across Australia. We pay our respects to their ancestors and Elders, past and present.

Brave's work also brings us into daily contact with many people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. We are committed to respecting the culture and heritage of each person we encounter, both inside and outside our organisation.

Executive Summary

Brave Foundation (Brave) welcomes the opportunity to share the impacts of domestic, family and sexual violence on young parents in Australia. We recognise the significant work underway across Australia and South Australia to prevent and address domestic, family and sexual violence. Unfortunately, there is still much more to be done, and Brave commends South Australia's commitment to investing in a Royal Commission to explore prevention, early intervention, response and recovery and healing approaches.

Of the young parents' Brave works alongside, in 2024 65% were or had historically been affected by family violence (either intimate partner or family of origin) and 35% were experiencing family violence on entry to our program. It is important to note that Brave works primarily with women and these figures only represent those who disclose their experience to us.

It is clear through this data that Family and Domestic Violence (FDV) is prevalent for young parents, especially young mothers. Brave therefore considers it important to make a submission to the Royal Commission and to advocate for better investment in research and support programs tailored to young parents, which is informed by lived experience.

For the purpose of this submission, it is useful to know that the young parents who utilise our program are referred to as 'participants' and the professional workforce that supports them are called 'mentors'. These titles were decided for young parents, by young parents.

About Brave

Brave is a national not-for-profit that equips expecting and parenting young people with resources, referral and education opportunities to facilitate happy, healthy and connected families. Brave's vision is to see a future where every young parent and their child thrives and belongs.

Our core program, Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) is currently funded by the Department of Social Services through the Child and Parenting Support (CAPS) services. Brave supports parents up to the age of 25 given they started parenting as a teenager.

Our program has achieved great success by supporting the holistic needs of our participants who are empowered through strength-based approaches, to self-identify goals that are important to them. Participant goals typically focus on accessing basic needs; being an effective parent; building a safe, secure and positive family environment; fostering personal and family wellbeing, and pursuing education, training or employment. Qualitative evidence indicates that the mentoring support participants receive through the SEPT program has a profound impact on their and their children's lives.

A core element of a Brave Mentor's role is to know and connect with local community. Annually, Brave makes around 1000 referrals to community services including to specialist FDV services such as 1800 RESPECT, No to Violence, The Orange Door, Local Legal Services and local family and domestic violence supports. Since it was introduced, Brave has supported more than 20 young women to apply for and receive the Escaping Violence Payment (EVP) from the Australian Government. In doing so, Brave ensures that existing services are promoted and accessed – enhancing, rather than duplicating support.

Brave has recently appointed a mentor in South Australia to service the Southern Metropolitan region of Adelaide. This position is funded by the Federal Department of Social Services through the Child and Parenting Support (CaPS) service. Prior to this appointment, mentoring was provided via a virtual mentor. In 2022 alone, 286 teenage mothers gave birth in South Australia. Brave has been meeting with key stakeholders in South Australia including the Department of Human Services, Office for Women,



Office for Early Childhood Development and service providers including Yarrow Place to explore opportunities to expand the number of mentors available for young parents in South Australia.

In early 2024, Brave [launched a Young Dads pilot](#) which is philanthropically funded to research, design and pilot a program for young fathers. This is a chance to explore positive parenting and healthy relationships at a pivotal time for young dads.

The impact of FDV on young parents

Brave works primarily alongside young mothers, 65% of whom were or had historically been affected by family violence (either intimate partner or family of origin), 35% of whom were experiencing family violence on entry to our program. These numbers reflect those participants who have disclosed FDV and concerning, are conservative numbers.

It is well documented that women are at greater risk of experiencing violence from an intimate partner during pregnancy and postpartum and the risk of violence during pregnancy is greater in women aged 18 to 24 years¹. However, there is limited Australian research on the scale and impact of FDV on young parents (and their children) who may have experienced or are experiencing FDV - despite being a cohort that is recognised as being at-risk². With such high numbers of Brave's participants disclosing their experiences with FDV, there is a clear need for research to explore how young parents specifically can be supported and FDV prevented and/or addressed.

It is understood that young parents carry an increased cognitive load due to their stage of development and when coupled with the stigma and isolation that accompanies their pregnancy or parenting responsibilities, they face additional barriers to receiving the kind of specialised support and access to resources they need to thrive and build a future for themselves and their families.

Young maternal age is a significant risk factor for children's engagement with child protection systems as is FDV. There are also implications for child safety if a young mother is unable to access support including those provided by FDV services. Participants have often shared negative experiences with statutory services, demonstrating that young mothers not only require access to FDV services, but they need to feel the service is one they can trust. As highlighted in our first recommendation – the development and evaluation of these services must be co-designed with young parents with lived experience of FDV.

Brave's professional mentors are trained to respond to and support participants who may be experiencing FDV. We have a harm reduction approach to screen and identify safety concerns, and a planning tool to improve the safety of participants. There are more details of the training and support staff received in Appendix 1.

¹ Campo M. Domestic and family violence in pregnancy and early parenthood. Canberra: Australian Government; 2015.

² Marino, J. L., Lewis, L. N., Bateson, D., Hickey, M., & Skinner, S. (2016). Teenage mothers. *Australian family physician*, 45(10), 712-717.

A number of Brave participants have shared how their mentor supported them with FDV and the impact that the program had on their lives. A longer list of quotes can be found in Appendix 2, however we highlight the below participant experience:

“If it weren't for [Mentor] calling the police to report domestic violence between my ex-partner and myself, I would never have done it. I've never done it before. She helped me through that big step and without her support I wouldn't be where I am today. Safe, confident that I AM safe and that my children were and now are. I am so thankful of her for helping me through that and the weeks and months following. I turned to her for help, and she was there in the most practical and supportive ways. She referred me to do family violence counselling, and I am still receiving support from them. What has changed? My outlook on an actual happy life.”

Brave's flagship Model of Mentoring is underpinned by evidence-based frameworks that work for young parents. This model is relationally focused with emphasis on both the mentor and participant trust-based relationship and, goal setting and referrals into community services which support achieving those goals. The program is delivered over a 12-month period. Importantly, Brave's service planning, design, delivery and improvement is strongly influenced by evidence drawn from research, organisational data, and lived experience. Lived experience is embedded as an approach through Brave's Model of Participation.

Evidence shows it is critical for young parents to have access to and trust in one-to-one support services that are tailored and specific to the needs of young parents. Currently, there is a lack of holistic, evidence-based services specifically for young parents, particularly in rural and regional areas.

Brave, along with many other organisations, are underfunded and therefore all of those who require and desire support are unable to access it. As outlined in Brave's Social Return on Investment Report³ the intergenerational impact of investing in a young parent's life has a high return on the community and government, and of course, their families.

Recommendations

1. Invest in research to explore the extent and impact of FDV on young parents and their children.
 - a. Ensure research is co-designed with young parents with lived experience of FDV.
2. Invest in support programs tailored for both mothers and fathers that focus on providing one to one mentoring and navigation support and positive parenting and healthy co-parenting as a prevention and early intervention.
3. Leverage those with lived experience to inform policy, programs, practice and research.

Conclusion

Brave acknowledges the significant progress Australia has made towards recognising the impact of FDV however there is still significant progress to be made. As highlighted in this submission, young mothers are a particularly vulnerable cohort at risk of experiencing FDV and it is crucial tailored supports are provided to young mothers and young fathers to ensure their families are given the chance to thrive.

³ [Measuring the value of SEPT - https://bravefoundation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Social-Return-on-Investment-Extract-Brave-Foundation.pdf](https://bravefoundation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Social-Return-on-Investment-Extract-Brave-Foundation.pdf)

Appendix 1

Essential Training for all Brave staff from frontline through to leadership:

AVERT Family Violence – Fundamentals – Provides an introductory understanding of the historical and legal contexts of family and domestic violence.

Program delivery staff then also complete DV Alert and Domestic and Family Violence Response Training - designed to build capacity in frontline workers within universal services for whom family violence is not a core function of their role.

Includes how to:

- **recognise** the signs of domestic and family violence
- **respond** with appropriate care
- **refer** effectively to support services

Within Brave training and support is provided by the Head of Program, Practice Lead and Team Leaders for managing FDV in their mentoring role:

Brave undertakes a FDV screening process at Intake. Were FDV is identified, there is a proactive approach to gathering information to support conversations to promote safety with our participants.

We have an Understanding and Improving Safety practice guide which guides mentors to help participants to understand behaviours that lead to increased risk, and it can also help them improve their safety by identifying protective behaviours.

When participants can identify unsafe behaviours and understand how these behaviours may be 'triggered', they can work with the mentor to replace or mitigate these unsafe behaviours.

Understanding and improving safety is a two-part process:

- Part One: Understanding safety. This involves gathering specific information about unsafe behaviours, such as how often they happen and when they're most likely to occur.
- Part Two: Improving safety. This involves developing concrete improvement strategies to prevent unsafe behaviours from happening or, if they do occur, minimising their impact and/or keeping children safe.

This is a harm-reduction approach and aims to identify and address safety concerns and improve the safety of participants. It is an evidence-informed approach that values the participant's knowledge about their unique situation and reinforces their autonomy, voice and choice to make informed decisions about the immediate safety of themselves and their children.

This practice guide is used whenever there is a disclosure and/or a goal has been set around Home and Safety. It can be used with all family members who are motivated to work on family and child safety concerns and are willing to collaborate on these concerns in meaningful ways.

Additionally, in terms of monitoring safety and risk, safety plans are considered 'live' and are monitored and updated throughout the service delivery period.

Appendix 2

Participants who indicated they were concerned about their own or their child's safety when they started or during SEPT received a set of branching questions about how their mentor helped with safety concerns. They also had an opportunity to provide open-ended text to explain more about the support.

These are the most relevant quotes related to family violence:

- *My mentor taught me how to be strong and how to just focus on just myself and my child otherwise I would've been in the same toxic cycle*
- *We have become more aware and confident about our surroundings.*
- *An AVO is in place, the service my mentor referred me to after we had to finish up with Brave, created a ripple effect for us now to have been accepted with start safely, to get help to afford a rental over the next 3 years and have further assistance. Praise God!*
- *Knowing who to call and what to do if I felt my child and I were in danger*
- *Encouraged strengths and abilities I didn't know I had to help feel safer*
- *She was so helpful gave me advice on what to do if we were unsafe*
- *If it weren't for [Mentor] calling the police to report domestic violence between my ex-partner and myself, I would never of done it. I've never done it before. She helped me through that big step and without her support I wouldn't be where I am today. Safe, confident that I AM safe and that my children were and now are. I am so thankful of her for helping me through that and the weeks and months following. I turned to her for help, and she was there in the most practical and supportive ways. She referred me to do family violence counselling, and I am still receiving support from them. What has changed? My outlook on an actual happy life.*
- *She helped me get into proper housing and made sure I was always safe*