



Inquiry into the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026

A submission to the Northern
Territory Legislative Scrutiny
Committee

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Introduction

yourtown welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Legislative Scrutiny Committee's inquiry into the *Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026*.

yourtown is a national organisation working alongside children, young people and families experiencing vulnerability, distress and disadvantage. Our services span mental health and wellbeing, parenting and early intervention, domestic and family violence, housing and accommodation, and education and employment pathways. Through this work, **yourtown** supports children experiencing abuse, neglect and exploitation, as well as families at risk of escalation into statutory child protection systems. Two key services are part of the support infrastructure in the Northern Territory – Kids Helpline and Parentline. Both services are detailed in Appendix 1.

yourtown supports the intent of the Bill to strengthen child safety, promote early intervention, and improve decision-making and accountability within the Northern Territory's child protection system; however, without strengthened investment in early intervention and clearer accountability mechanisms, the reforms will not deliver their intended outcomes for children and families in the Northern Territory.

The Bill must be implemented through a child rights lens, ensuring safety, participation, cultural identity and access to appropriate support are realised in practice.

Early intervention must operate before statutory thresholds are reached, not as a response to them. Services such as Parentline and Kids Helpline already perform this function but are constrained by capacity and funding. Without a system-wide commitment to accessible early intervention, the reforms risk reinforcing reactive, crisis-driven responses.

The following key points summarise the core issues identified in this submission and the areas where reform and implementation efforts should be strengthened:

- Early intervention must occur before statutory thresholds are reached, not as a response to them
- Demand for support in the Northern Territory is significantly exceeding service capacity
- Without sustained investment, the Bill's reforms will not be realised in practice
- Community-based services are core system infrastructure, not supplementary supports
- Cultural safety and children's participation must be actively implemented and accountable
- Early intervention must recognise the diverse needs of stakeholders and ensure that a variety of channels are available to meet them where they are at.

Evidence of need

Strengthening early intervention supports, including access to parenting and family support services, are central to child protection outcomes and **yourtown** service data highlights both the nature of demand and the gaps that exist.

Kids Helpline data for the Northern Territory indicates both the scale of need and the complexity of issues experienced by children and young people. In 2025, counsellors responded to 544 contacts from children and young people, including more than 300 counselling contacts. The most common concerns related to emotional wellbeing (31%), family relationships (19%), mental health (18%), relationships with peers and friends (11%), and suicide-related issues (10%). Contacts about child abuse accounted for 1 in 15 counselling contacts in 2025. In addition, child abuse accounted for 38% of 13 emergency responses in 2025.

This data reflects only the contacts the service was able to respond to. In 2025, 1,262 children and young people in the Northern Territory attempted to contact Kids Helpline, meaning that more than half were unable to access support. This highlights significant unmet demand and has direct implications for early intervention, as missed opportunities for timely support increase the risk of escalation into crisis or statutory involvement.

In 2025, Parentline counsellors answered 178 contacts from the Northern Territory. The most common concerns raised by parents and carers contacting Parentline included challenging behaviour and discipline (13%), parent relationships (13%), parent-child relationships (12%), child mental and emotional health (10%), parent mental and emotional health (9%), and parenting role and self-concept (8%). These issues reflect pressures that, if not addressed early, can escalate into more serious family stress and child protection concerns.

Patterns of use also demonstrate how families engage with early intervention services. From the Northern Territory, 41% of contacts to Parentline were made outside of regular business hours, reinforcing the importance of flexible, after-hours support. In addition, 18% of counselling sessions involved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers, highlighting the need for culturally safe and accessible services.

Our service data highlights unmet demand from the Northern Territory. In 2025:

- **More than half of children and young people who attempted to contact Kids Helpline were unable to access support**, representing missed opportunities for early intervention at scale
- **287 Parentline contacts went unanswered**, indicating unmet need among parents and carers seeking and accessing timely support when they needed it

These figures demonstrate a systemic gap in access to early intervention services. Without sufficient capacity, children and families are more likely to enter the system at crisis point rather than receiving timely, preventative support.

Currently, Kids Helpline receives no funding from the Northern Territory Government, and Parentline receives only minimal investment. This represents a critical gap in the Territory's early intervention system.

Collaboration

yourtown works closely with governments and communities to ensure Kids Helpline is accessible where and when children and young people need support – this includes the free, national helpline and associated programs, plus provision of virtual psychology services in schools on a fee-for-service arrangement. This helps ensure equity of access to services, particularly in remote locations or where no professional supports are available in the community.

Through this role and reach, Kids Helpline contributes directly to early identification of risk and supports children before issues escalate to crisis or statutory intervention. Its accessibility across digital and phone channels ensures that children and young people, including those in remote communities, can access support in a way that feels safe, appropriate and responsive to their needs.

This submission is informed by **yourtown's** direct service experience and evidence base, including insights from Kids Helpline, Parentline and Your Voice, our youth engagement initiative.¹ Your Voice insights highlight that children and young people in the Northern Territory experience significant barriers to safety and wellbeing, including housing instability, family conflict, exposure to violence and difficulty accessing support.

¹ **yourtown**. (2025.). *Your Voice*. <https://www.yourtown.com.au/your-voice>

Young people described long wait times, limited-service availability and concerns about privacy and trust, alongside a strong preference for support that is accessible outside standard hours. These barriers are also experienced by children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, who may face additional pressures relating to family expectations, stigma around help-seeking, and concerns about whether services understand their culture or circumstances.

Recommendation summary

Together, these sources provide a comprehensive evidence base combining quantitative insights on demand and risk with qualitative insights into lived experience and system navigation. This provides a strong foundation for the recommendations outlined in this submission.

Recommendation	Issue addressed	Purpose/impact
Strengthen expectations for early intervention, including sustained funding for Parentline and Kids Helpline, and clarify expectations for “proactive efforts”	Implementation gaps, low awareness of services, and insufficient service capacity	Enables earlier support, reduces escalation into statutory intervention, and improves child safety outcomes
Improve access to early intervention and support implementation through targeted awareness, referral pathways and culturally responsive engagement	Barriers including geography, cost, stigma, and limited after-hours support	Supports timely help-seeking, particularly for remote and vulnerable populations
Strengthen the role of parenting support within early intervention through investment in Parentline and integration with referral pathways and service delivery models	Underutilisation of Parentline and limited referral pathways	Strengthens family engagement, enables earlier support, and reduces escalation into statutory intervention
Strengthen early intervention responses for children and young people through sustained investment in Kids Helpline and integration of digital and after-hours support	Unmet demand and lack of funding for accessible youth support services	Ensures children and young people can access confidential, timely support when and how they need it
Enable flexible and innovative service delivery, including contingent psychology and virtual school-based support models, and support implementation through investment in digital, phone and school-based services	Limited access to services, workforce shortages and geographic isolation	Improves accessibility, addresses workforce gaps, reduces delays in support, and ensures children and families can access timely, local or virtual support where in-person services are unavailable
Strengthen early intervention responses for children and young people in contact with, or at risk of entering, the youth justice system through access to Kids Helpline and Parentline	Overlap between child protection and youth justice, and limited access to trusted support pathways	Reduces escalation into youth justice and child protection systems and strengthens family connection and outcomes

Recommendation	Issue addressed	Purpose/impact
Strengthen system accountability and coordination and support implementation through clear expectations, reporting and service integration	Fragmented system, duplication, and poor service transitions	Improves service integration, reduces gaps, and enhances outcomes for children and families
Support flexible, community-based and digital service delivery models	Limited access to services outside business hours and in remote areas	Increases accessibility, reduces isolation, and ensures services meet children and families where they are
Embed community-led decision-making and strengthen provisions for Aboriginal children and families and support implementation through culturally safe, community-driven approaches	Risk of reduced influence	Supports self-determination, cultural safety, and better decision-making outcomes for Aboriginal children
Require cultural planning and involvement of Aboriginal-controlled organisations	Risk that cultural connection is not consistently maintained in practice	Strengthens connection to family, community, culture and Country, reducing cultural harm
Embed culturally safe, trauma-informed practice and workforce capability requirements	Lack of consistency in culturally safe service delivery and workforce preparedness	Builds trust, improves engagement, and ensures safe and effective responses for Aboriginal families
Strengthen safeguards for family responsibility agreements and orders and support implementation through trauma-informed, voluntary and supported responses	Risk of coercive or compliance-driven approaches and escalation of family conflict or violence	Promotes trauma-informed, support-first interventions that improve family safety and stability
Strengthen children's participation provisions and support implementation through active and supported mechanisms	Participation risks being procedural rather than meaningful	Ensures children's voices are heard and influence decisions, improving outcomes and trust in the system

Children's rights should underpin the implementation of the Bill. This includes the right to be safe from harm, to be heard in decisions that affect them, to maintain connection to culture and community, and to access support that meets their needs. These rights are particularly important in child protection systems, where decisions have long-term impacts on children's safety, development and identity. Ensuring these rights are upheld in practice strengthens both accountability and outcomes for children.

Feedback on the Amendments to the Bill

Early intervention and proactive efforts

Early intervention as a core part of the reform

The Bill introduces a stronger focus on early intervention through a new “proactive efforts” framework, requiring action to address risks to children and support reunification where possible. This aligns with the Committee’s focus on whether the Bill delivers effective, safe and accountable reforms, particularly in relation to early intervention and the protection of children’s rights.

Early intervention must be a clear priority in the child protection system. Many families experience stress, conflict and challenges well before they encounter statutory processes. For the purposes of this submission, we define early intervention as support that is available to families prior to them coming into contact with the statutory child protection system, rather than waiting to provide support when the family is reported to child safety or reaches a statutory threshold. This is broader than a conservative or threshold-based view, which tends to frame early intervention as action taken once a family is already identified by the system.²

Early intervention includes both universal and targeted supports that are accessible to families at the point when challenges first emerge.² This reinforces that intervention should not be contingent on risk reaching a reporting threshold but should be available earlier to prevent escalation. Supporting families earlier helps prevent harm, reduces escalation into child protection, and improves outcomes for children and young people.³ Without strong early intervention, there is a risk that the reforms will not achieve their intended impact.

Barriers to effective early intervention

There are barriers to delivering early intervention effectively. These include both barriers to accessing support in the first place and barriers within the system that affect how early intervention is delivered in practice. Families and communities often have limited awareness about what supports are available. Services can be difficult to access, particularly for those in remote areas or outside standard business hours. Ongoing distrust of government systems can act as a barrier to engagement, reinforcing the importance of culturally safe and community-led approaches to support early help-seeking. These barriers can be heightened for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Cultural expectations, stigma around mental health, and concerns about bringing shame to family or community can make it more difficult to seek help early. Privacy is also critical, as some young people may avoid services if they fear their engagement could become known within their family or community.^{4,5} This reinforces the need for confidential, culturally responsive and flexible service options.

Limited and ongoing minimal funding from the Northern Territory government for services such as Parentline and Kids Helpline also constrains their ability to promote awareness and expand access. As a result, many parents in the Northern Territory may not be aware that they can access free, confidential support through Parentline at times of stress or challenge.

² Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). (2020). *Defining the public health model for the child welfare system*. <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/practice-guides/defining-public-health-model-child-welfare-services-context>

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2023). *Australia’s children: Child abuse and neglect*. https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/6af928d6-692e-4449-b915-cf2ca946982f/aihw-cws-69_australias_children_print-report.pdf

⁴ Rickwood, D., Deane, F. P., Wilson, C. J., & Ciarrochi, J. (2005). *Young people’s help-seeking for mental health problems*. <https://doi.org/10.5172/jamh.4.3.218>

⁵ WHO. (2021). *Mental health of adolescents*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health>

Similarly, the lack of Territory funding for Kids Helpline limits service capacity and contributes to unmet demand. In 2025, Kids Helpline was only able to respond to 43% of contacts from children and young people in the Northern Territory, meaning that a significant proportion of young people seeking support were unable to access support when they need it most, including at times of distress or crisis. Without investment and clear expectations, the Bill's "proactive efforts" may not be implemented consistently in practice.

Your Voice insights from young people in the Northern Territory reinforce these barriers. Young people described giving up when services were difficult to access or involved long wait times, and highlighted the importance of timely support when issues first emerge. Experiences of housing instability, cost of living pressures, and lack of safe places to go, particularly at night, were identified as drivers of distress and risk. These findings highlight that early intervention must extend beyond service availability to include safe environments, accessible support, and practical assistance for families.

Barriers to early intervention in the Northern Territory include:

- Limited awareness of available services
- Restricted access outside business hours
- Geographic isolation and remoteness
- Concerns around privacy, stigma and trust
- Insufficient service capacity

These barriers are particularly significant for Aboriginal families and those from culturally diverse backgrounds, reinforcing the need for culturally safe, flexible and confidential support options.

Recommendation: Amend the Bill to clearly establish early intervention as a priority before statutory thresholds are reached within the proactive efforts framework, and strengthen implementation by ensuring adequate service capacity, accessibility and consistency in delivery.

Role of key early intervention services

Parentline: Accessible support for families

Parentline is a key example of an early intervention service that supports the intent of the Bill. The service offers a safety net for families by providing free counselling and support to parents and carers at critical moments. It is available after hours and on weekends, when families may feel most isolated and when local services are often unavailable. It is accessible by phone, which is particularly important for families in remote communities.

By providing timely advice and support on issues such as parenting challenges, family conflict, child behaviour, and stress, Parentline helps parents stabilise situations early and reduces the likelihood of escalation into child protection intervention. It also reduces barriers to access, including geography, cost and stigma, making it a critical part of an effective early intervention system.

In addition to face-to-face supports, virtual services such as Parentline play a vital role in making support accessible to parents and carers in the Northern Territory. Parentline supports parents to build strong relationships with their children to enhance their safety and wellbeing. The service is available 18 hours a day, including on weekends, and assists with wide-ranging issues including challenging childhood behaviour and discipline, parent-child relationships, parenting strategies, and mental/emotional health issues for both the child and the parent. In 2025, Parentline responded to 172 parents and carers in the Northern Territory. More than two-thirds (69%) involved counselling sessions providing in-depth therapeutic support to families.

Phone and digital channels allow parents and carers to seek help in a private and confidential, flexible and timely way, particularly in rural and remote areas or where there are barriers to attending in person services. This includes situations where parents may be concerned that seeking help could result in involvement from statutory authorities. The confidential nature of Parentline can help reduce these concerns and create a safer entry point for families to seek support early. These modes of contact help reduce isolation, enable earlier help-seeking, and complement community-based services by providing immediate and ongoing support when it is needed.

Recommendation: Amend the Bill to recognise parenting support as a core component of early intervention within the proactive efforts framework, and strengthen implementation through sustained Northern Territory Government investment in Parentline, including referral pathways, after-hours and digital access, and culturally responsive community engagement.

Kids Helpline: Early support for children and young people

Kids Helpline and Kids Helpline @ School also play an important early intervention role. Kids Helpline provides a safe and confidential space for children and young people to seek support, often at the point when concerns first emerge. For some children, it is the first place they disclose issues such as abuse, neglect, family conflict or mental health distress. Despite its critical role in early identification of risk and crisis response, Kids Helpline is not funded by the Northern Territory Government, limiting its capacity to meet demand and support children and young people consistently.

Children and young people engage with Kids Helpline for many of the same reasons that parents and carers engage with Parentline. Digital and phone-based supports offer privacy, flexibility and immediacy, which are particularly important where there are barriers to accessing in-person services or where children may not feel safe seeking help through formal systems.⁵ This is reflected in usage patterns in the Northern Territory. In 2025, one-third (38%) of contacts were made via webchat. In the same year, 63% of contacts occurred outside normal business hours, highlighting the importance of accessible, after-hours support for children and young people. These trends show that children and young people in the Northern Territory increasingly seek support in ways that are private, immediate and accessible outside traditional service hours. This has clear implications for how early intervention services are designed and delivered, including the need for flexible, digitally enabled support models.

Recommendation: Amend the Bill to recognise accessible, confidential support services for children and young people as a core component of early intervention, and support implementation through sustained Northern Territory Government funding for Kids Helpline, including integration of digital and after-hours support.

Barriers and underutilisation

Parentline is an underutilised resource in the Northern Territory, with counselling sessions to service peaking in 2021 and declining in subsequent years, with a slight increase in 2025. This underutilisation reflects limited Territory investment in awareness, community engagement and culturally responsive communication approaches, which constrains the reach of the service despite demonstrated demand for accessible early support. The Northern Territory contributes minimally to support Parentline. Increased referrals from the government, alongside more targeted and culturally appropriate awareness raising efforts (including engagement with communities and communication in relevant languages) would assist Northern Territory parents and carers to seek help early, before problems escalate. This would lead to more timely support for emergent issues, and better long-term outcomes for Northern

Territory families. In Queensland, increased state government investment along with a targeted awareness-raising campaign resulted in a 40% increase in Queensland contacts to Parentline in the 9 months from July 2025-March 2026.

Recommendation: Amend the Bill to strengthen expectations for early help-seeking and service accessibility, and support implementation through sustained investment in services like Parentline, targeted awareness campaigns, culturally responsive engagement, language-appropriate communication and formal referral pathways from government services.

Early intervention and support for children at risk or in contact with the youth justice system

Children and young people who are in contact with, or at risk of entering, the youth justice system often present with complex and intersecting needs, including mental health concerns, trauma, family conflict and instability. Virtual and phone-based services such as Kids Helpline play an important role in providing a confidential and accessible point of support for these cohorts, particularly where there are barriers to engaging with formal systems or where trust in statutory services is low.

These service models also provide important support pathways for families. Parentline can support parents and carers whose children are involved in the youth justice system, including those in care or in detention, by providing guidance, emotional support and strategies to manage complex family dynamics and maintain connection where possible. Strengthening access to these services can support earlier intervention, reduce escalation into both child protection and youth justice systems, and improve outcomes for children and families. These supports are critical to upholding children's rights, including the right to be safe from harm, to maintain connection with family, and to access support that meets their needs, particularly for those in contact with multiple statutory systems.

Recommendation: Amend the Bill to recognise the importance of early intervention for children and young people in contact with, or at risk of entering, the youth justice system, and support implementation by ensuring access to confidential services such as Kids Helpline and Parentline to strengthen family connection and reduce escalation.

Flexible and innovative service delivery

Kids Helpline @ School supports early intervention by engaging children in familiar environments, building emotional skills, and encouraging help-seeking behaviours before problems escalate. This approach helps normalise help-seeking and ensures children are supported early, within settings where they already feel safe and connected.

To help overcome service and workforce gaps, Kids Helpline can also provide virtual, one-on-one school-based psychology services to students on a fee for service basis, which helps ensure schools can provide vital early intervention support regardless of challenges such as geographic remoteness or local service availability. We have successfully implemented this model in New South Wales on a fee-for-service arrangement, where schools have accessed virtual support when they are unable to find a locum to replace a psychologist on leave; or where they are unable to recruit. This demonstrates a scalable and practical solution to workforce shortages and access barriers, particularly in the Northern Territory where communities often experience limited access to local specialist services. It highlights how flexible, digitally enabled service models can complement existing systems and ensure that children and young people are able to access timely support when needed. Embedding similar approaches within the Northern Territory would strengthen the delivery of early intervention under the Bill by improving access, reducing delays, and ensuring support is available before issues escalate.

Together, these services demonstrate the importance of flexible, accessible and trusted modes of support in strengthening early intervention and improving outcomes for children and families.

Recommendation: Amend the Bill to enable flexible approaches to early intervention, including digital and school-based delivery, and support implementation through investment in virtual and school-based service models to address workforce shortages and improve access in regional and remote communities.

Lived experience and access

Young people in the Northern Territory who participated in Your Voice also highlighted the importance of being able to access support at times when they feel most vulnerable, including outside business hours, reinforcing the value of services that are available when and how they are needed. Privacy is also a critical factor in help-seeking, with some young people indicating they may avoid services altogether if they are concerned that their access to support could be known within their family or community. This is particularly important for young people and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, who may prefer discreet and confidential ways to access support and may be less likely to engage where there are concerns about stigma or being judged. Ensuring that services offer private, confidential and flexible modes of engagement, including phone and digital options, can create safer pathways for young people to seek help early and when they need it most.

Recommendation: Amend the Bill to require active and supported participation of children and young people in decisions that affect them, with clear expectations for how their views are heard, considered and given weight in practice.

Strengthening the system

The community sector is central to delivering early intervention and should be recognised and resourced accordingly. Community-based services are often trusted, flexible and well positioned to engage families early. There is also a need for more integrated and accessible service models. Local hubs can assist by bringing services together in one place, making it easier for families to navigate support and access help when they need it.

Parents and communities need to be both supported and resourced. Strengthening parenting capability requires access to practical tools, financial stability and connected services. Supporting children to develop resilience requires investment in connection, belonging, skills and opportunities to participate. Services must also be flexible enough to respond to the diverse needs of families and communities.

Early support is essential to uphold children's rights to timely and appropriate assistance and to ensure the Bill delivers on its intent to strengthen early intervention within the child protection system. Without addressing these resourcing gaps, there is a risk that the "proactive efforts" framework will rely on services that do not have the capacity to meet demand, limiting the effectiveness of the reforms.

Recommendation: Amend the Bill to recognise the central role of community-based services in early intervention, and strengthen implementation through sustained investment in and integration of these services, including development of locally accessible service hubs and coordinated service delivery models.

Aboriginal children, families and communities

The Bill recognises that kinship groups and Aboriginal communities have a major role in promoting the wellbeing of Aboriginal children, and that Aboriginal children should be supported to maintain connection to family, community, culture, language and Country. This is a critical foundation and aligns with the Committee's focus on whether the Bill upholds rights and delivers safe and effective reforms. It should also be understood to include maintaining connection to traditional cultural practices and healing, Lore, language and Country, recognising the central role these play in identity, wellbeing and belonging for Aboriginal children and young people.

However, the Bill also makes clear that the underlying principles are intended to guide decision-making and do not create enforceable rights. In this context, changes that frame participation as an "opportunity to participate" risk weakening the practical influence of Aboriginal children, families and communities in significant decisions, particularly in complex statutory processes. If participation is not actively supported, there is a risk that, without clear practice expectations, accountability and monitoring, these principles will not translate into consistent practice across the system. This may result in unintended long-term outcomes for children and families, including disconnection from culture, instability in care arrangements, and reduced trust in child protection systems, which can undermine engagement and long-term wellbeing.

To strengthen outcomes for Aboriginal children, the Bill should be refined and implemented in ways that embed cultural safety, self-determination and genuine participation. Historical mistreatment from government systems, leading to ongoing mistrust of these systems, can act as a barrier to engagement, making culturally safe and community-led approaches essential to supporting early help-seeking. This includes recognising and embedding the role of traditional cultural practices and healing, which are central to supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children, families and communities. These barriers are compounded where services are not experienced as culturally safe or trusted, reinforcing the importance of community-led approaches and flexible, accessible support options.⁶ There is currently limited visibility of how these principles are applied in practice, reinforcing the need for clear expectations, monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure consistent implementation. This should include:

- Community-led decision-making in practice: Strengthen mechanisms that ensure Aboriginal community voices shape significant decisions, not just inform them, thereby recognising the authority of kinship groups and community structures. This should include specific measures to ensure Aboriginal children's own views are heard, supported and given weight in decisions, in culturally safe, age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate ways.
- Cultural planning requirements for significant decisions: Require cultural planning to be developed early and reviewed regularly, including practical steps to maintain connection to Country, family, kinship networks, language and community, particularly when placement is outside a child's community or kinship group.
- Involvement of Aboriginal-controlled organisations: Require decision-making, support planning and service responses to involve Aboriginal-controlled services wherever possible, including culturally informed family support and navigation assistance.
- Culturally safe, trauma-informed service design and delivery: Require services involved in proactive efforts, agreements and orders to demonstrate cultural awareness, trauma-informed practice and strategies for engaging Aboriginal families

⁶ SNAICC. (2017). *Understanding and applying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle*. https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Understanding_applying_ATSICCP.pdf

in ways they prefer (including choice of setting, language supports, and who is involved).

- Workforce capability and accountability: Maintain identified First Nations roles and require cultural capability training for all relevant staff, with clear expectations about clinical supervision (focused on reflective and culturally safe practice), reflective practice and quality improvement to ensure culturally safe decision-making in practice.
- Flexible and accessible support options (including digital): Ensure families can access support in ways that feel safe and private, including phone, online and hybrid options alongside face-to-face supports. This is particularly important where there are barriers to in-person engagement, including remoteness, distrust of government services, safety concerns, or fear of stigma. Enabling this requires investment in infrastructure and connectivity so families in remote communities can access and engage with digital and hybrid services in an equitable way.
- Continuous feedback and adaptability: Embed mechanisms for ongoing feedback from Aboriginal children, families and communities so services and approaches can be adjusted based on what is working and what is not.

These measures are critical to uphold Aboriginal children's rights to culture, identity, family and kinship, participation in decisions that affect them, access to culturally safe services, and self-determination, and to ensure reforms deliver safety and stability without cultural harm.

Strengthening culturally safe and accessible pathways is also critical to enabling early intervention, as families are more likely to seek support earlier when services are trusted and responsive. Your Voice findings consistently emphasise the importance to young people of cultural safety, being understood, and having identity and background respected when seeking help or navigating systems. Without culturally safe and accessible supports, families are less likely to engage early, which can lead to increased risk and greater reliance on statutory intervention. Ensuring services are trusted, responsive and easy to access is essential to enable early help-seeking and to support the effectiveness of the Bill's early intervention reforms.

Recommendation: Amend the Bill and strengthen implementation settings so that decision-making for Aboriginal children is genuinely community-led and culturally safe in practice, including by:

- **Embedding community-led decision-making mechanisms, recognising the authority of kinship systems and Aboriginal community structures, and ensuring Aboriginal children's views are actively supported and given due weight;**
- **Requiring cultural planning for significant decisions and mandating the involvement of Aboriginal-controlled organisations in decision-making and support;**
- **Ensuring services demonstrate culturally safe, trauma-informed practice, supported by an appropriately skilled workforce;**
- **Ensuring flexible, accessible engagement options, including phone, digital and hybrid models alongside face-to-face support; and**
- **Establishing accountability mechanisms, including clear practice expectations, monitoring, and continuous feedback from Aboriginal children, families and communities to ensure reforms are effective in practice.**

Family responsibility agreements and orders

The Bill introduces new mechanisms for early intervention and escalation, including family responsibility agreements and family responsibility orders. These are intended to strengthen

parental accountability and provide a stepped pathway to address child wellbeing concerns. While these mechanisms create opportunities for earlier engagement with families, they also present risks if implemented in a compliance-driven way. Agreements and orders may become coercive, particularly where families are vulnerable or disengaged from services. This may contribute to escalation of family conflict and, in some cases, increase risks associated with domestic and family violence.

The Bill itself acknowledges that family responsibility agreements may not be appropriate where domestic and family violence risks are present, and that inappropriate use could escalate harm. Safeguards are needed to ensure responses do not inadvertently compromise children's rights to safety and wellbeing.

To mitigate these risks, the Bill should strengthen safeguards to ensure that:

- Family responsibility agreements are voluntary and supported wherever possible, with a clear focus on engagement rather than compliance
- There are mandatory domestic and family violence risk assessment processes, with clear exclusion criteria
- Families have access to holistic, wrap-around support services, addressing underlying drivers such as mental health, housing, and safety

Kids Helpline data from the Northern Territory highlights that child protection concerns frequently co-occur with family relationship issues and emotional wellbeing, reflecting the complexity of issues facing children and families.

Together, this evidence highlights the complexity of family circumstances and supports a support-first rather than compliance-driven approach, ensuring that interventions strengthen family capacity and safety and do not escalate risk.

Recommendation: Amend the Bill to strengthen safeguards for family responsibility agreements and orders, including requirements for voluntary and supported engagement, mandatory domestic and family violence risk assessment, and access to holistic, trauma-informed family support services.

System accountability and coordination

The Bill strengthens the responsibilities of government and public authorities to promote and safeguard the wellbeing, safety and stability of children, and to work cooperatively in delivering these functions. However, there is a risk that these responsibilities are not supported by clear accountability mechanisms or effective coordination across systems. Without this, fragmentation between child protection, health, education, justice and family support services may persist, limiting the effectiveness of reforms.

This includes the need to recognise and resource the role of community-based services, which are critical to delivering early intervention and ongoing family support. Services such as Kids Helpline and Parentline provide accessible, trusted entry points for children and families, yet require sustained investment and community development funding to maintain reach, build local engagement, and respond to demand. Without adequate support for the community sector, there is a risk that system reforms will not be able to deliver coordinated, accessible and effective outcomes for children and families. This includes ensuring that services relied upon to deliver early intervention and support, such as Parentline and Kids Helpline, are adequately resourced to meet demand and fulfil their role within the broader system.

To strengthen system performance, the Bill should be supported by:

- Clear accountability mechanisms, including defined responsibilities and oversight arrangements
- Regular reporting on outcomes for children, not just system activity or compliance
- Improved integration across services, particularly between child protection, health, education and family support systems

Clear accountability supports the protection of children's rights across systems.

Your Voice findings from the Northern Territory highlight system fragmentation. Young people described having to repeat their stories across services, experiencing long wait times, and receiving inconsistent or unhelpful responses. These experiences can reduce trust in services and contribute to disengagement, particularly for those already experiencing vulnerability.

Recommendation: Strengthen system accountability and coordination by introducing clear accountability mechanisms, reporting on outcomes for children, and ensuring integrated responses across child protection, health, education, justice and family support systems.

Children's participation in decision-making

The Bill strengthens provisions relating to children and young people's participation, requiring that children are given information, supported to express their views, and provided with an opportunity to participate in decisions that affect them. However, there is a risk that participation becomes procedural rather than meaningful in practice. Children and young people may face barriers to participation, including age, trauma, fear of consequences, and limited access to support to help them understand processes and express their views.

To ensure the intent of the Bill is realised, participation provisions should be strengthened to require:

- Active and supported participation, not just opportunity
- Access to independent advocacy or support persons to assist children to engage safely
- Transparent documentation of how children's views are considered and influence decisions

We also encourage targeted consultation with children and young people during the review and development of legislation relevant to their lives, so that their needs and perspectives are fully understood and reflected.

Your Voice findings from the Northern Territory indicate that some young people feel they do not have a say in decisions that affect them, or lack the confidence and support to engage with decision-makers. This highlights the need for participation approaches that are actively supported, culturally safe, and accessible.

Strengthening participation in practice is essential to give effect to the intent of the Bill's provisions, which require that children are supported to express their views and that those views are taken into account in decisions involving them. This reflects children's right to be heard in decisions that affect them.

Recommendation: Amend the Bill to strengthen children's participation provisions by requiring active and supported participation in decision-making, including access to independent advocacy or support persons, and mechanisms to demonstrate how children's views have informed outcomes.

Conclusion

yourtown supports the intent of the *Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026* and recognises its potential to strengthen early intervention, participation and system accountability. However, without sustained investment in accessible early intervention services and clear implementation accountability, the intended outcomes of the reforms will not be realised.

Evidence from Kids Helpline, Parentline and Your Voice demonstrates that children, young people and families seek support when it is timely, confidential and accessible. Where these conditions are not met, opportunities for early intervention are missed and issues escalate into crisis.

Services such as Kids Helpline and Parentline are critical system infrastructure in delivering early intervention, yet current resourcing limits their ability to meet demand. Ensuring these services are sustainably funded and embedded within the system will be essential to achieving the intent of the Bill.

This reform presents a critical opportunity to shift the system toward earlier, more effective support. Without investment and accountability, that opportunity will not be realised.

We would welcome the opportunity to explore these ideas with you in further detail and would welcome the opportunity to discuss our experiences as part of ongoing consultations. Should you require further information about any issues raised in the submission, please do not hesitate to contact Tracy Adams, CEO of **yourtown** via email at advocacy@yourtown.com.au.

Appendix 2

Parentline

yourtown's Parentline is an early intervention service that provides free, confidential phone and webchat counselling and support to parents and carers of children throughout the Northern Territory and Queensland. This includes support after hours and on weekends, when families may feel isolated and when local, face-to-face services are often unavailable. Parentline supports parents to build strong relationships with their children to enhance their safety and wellbeing. By providing timely advice and support, Parentline helps parents manage challenges early, strengthen relationships with their children, and build confidence in their parenting. This can reduce the risk of harm and the need for more intensive intervention.

Parentline plays an important role in supporting the intent of the Bill, particularly in strengthening early intervention and reducing escalation into the statutory child protection system. The service is accessible by phone and through webchat, which is particularly important for families in regional and remote areas of the Northern Territory. This reduces common barriers to accessing support, including geography, cost and stigma, and ensures that families can seek help at the point they need it most.

Kids Helpline

Kids Helpline has been supporting children and young people across Australia for 35 years, including those in the Northern Territory, where it provides free, confidential 24/7 counselling via phone and online. It is often a first or only point of contact for children and young people experiencing distress, including those facing abuse, neglect, family conflict, or mental health challenges, and provides a safe and accessible pathway for early disclosure, particularly for children who may not feel able to seek help through formal systems, no matter where they live or what time support is required.

Kids Helpline @ School

Kids Helpline @ School complements this by providing early intervention and prevention support in educational settings. In 2025, 134 children and young people in the Northern Territory participated in Kids Helpline @ School sessions. Delivered by qualified counsellors, the program helps children build emotional literacy, develop coping skills, and understand when and how to seek help. It also normalises help-seeking behaviour and connects students with trusted support pathways early. Together, these services demonstrate the importance of accessible, flexible and community-based early intervention supports in strengthening child safety and improving system outcomes.

yourtown is a trusted provider of services for young people, with a focus on mental health and wellbeing, parenting and early childhood development, long-term unemployment, prevention of youth suicide, child protection, and support for those experiencing domestic and family violence. **yourtown** has evolved to helping hundreds of thousands of young people each year through a range of service offerings, supporting them through many difficult challenges.

Our services

- Kids Helpline, providing professional counselling and support 24x7 to 5–25-year-olds across Australia since 1991
- Domestic and family violence refuge, transitional housing, and therapeutic supports for women and their children, including post-refuge support
- Accommodation and therapeutic supports for young parents and their children at high risk
- Early intervention mental health services for children aged 0-18 years old and their families
- Parentline, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers in the Northern Territory and Queensland
- Young Parents Program providing parenting support to help with child development, life skills and health and wellbeing activities in safe, supportive environments
- Employment, education, and social enterprise programs to support young people at risk of long-term unemployment to re-engage with education and/or employment.

Parentline

Parentline offers free confidential phone and webchat counselling and support for parents and carers of children in Queensland and the Northern Territory. It offers a safety net for families by providing support when it is most needed. This includes after hours and weekends, where families feel isolated and where local services are unavailable. In 2025, there were more than 7,000 counselling contacts with parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory.

Kids Helpline

yourtown's Kids Helpline is Australia's only free and confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling service for those aged 5 to 25. It offers children and young people a range of care options that are right for their needs and circumstances. Our commitment to being there anytime, and for any reason, has meant that we have responded to more than 9 million contacts from children and young people nationally in the 35 years since our service was first established, while also providing tens of millions of self-help interactions via our website and social channels. In 2025, our Kids Helpline counsellors responded to 128,992 contacts from children and young people across Australia, including 5,190 crisis responses for children and young people at imminent risk of harm.

Kids Helpline @ School

Kids Helpline @ School is **yourtown's** national early intervention and prevention education program, delivered virtually into classrooms by professional counsellors. The program designed to normalise help-seeking behaviours and equip students with tools for lifelong mental health and wellbeing. In 2024, 79,527 primary school children were reached by Kids Helpline @ School sessions from 537 schools across Australia, and 70,508 high school students were reached by Kids Helpline @ School sessions from 134 schools across Australia. These sessions help children and young people build emotional literacy, resilience, and help-seeking behaviours, while addressing topics such as bullying, mental health, relationships, and online safety. The program continues to be a vital support for educators and families, offering a proactive approach to mental wellbeing in school communities.

My Circle

My Circle is a free, confidential, and clinically moderated online peer support platform for young people aged 12–25, developed by **yourtown's** Kids Helpline in partnership with the Bupa Foundation. In 2024, 3,558 young people actively engaged with My Circle, accessing support for mental health, relationships, identity, and wellbeing. The platform offers a safe digital space for young people to connect with peers and build

coping strategies under the guidance of trained moderators. It is particularly valuable for those in rural and remote areas who face barriers to traditional services.

Family and Domestic Violence Refuge and Transitional Housing

yourtown's Family and Domestic Violence Refuge provides safe, supported accommodation for women and children for up to 12 weeks, or longer depending on individual needs. The refuge is staffed by a specialised, trauma-informed team where families can begin to rebuild their lives. The service is designed to foster empowerment, restore self-agency, and support women and children to reconnect with their strengths, aspirations, and sense of control.

Families exiting the refuge may transition into **yourtown's** Transitional Housing Program, which offers continued safety and stability for up to 12 months. This program is a critical bridge to long-term, independent living and includes wrap-around support tailored to each family's goals. This includes assistance with legal and financial matters, employment pathways, education access, therapeutic support, and helping children settle into school and community life. The refuge also offers an Outreach Program at exit, enabling families to maintain connection with the refuge and receive ongoing support after their stay. This continuity of care ensures women and children remain supported as they navigate their next steps for as long as they need. In 2024-25, **yourtown** supported 29 parents and 48 children through refuge accommodation and 21 parents and 38 children through transitional housing.

Face-to-face Programs for Children and Families

yourtown provides accommodation and intensive individualised support to vulnerable at-risk young parents and their children through our San Miguel service. For over 40 years, San Miguel has provided a place to call home for vulnerable and at-risk families. In 2024-25, San Miguel supported 33 parents and 41 infants and young children. **yourtown's** CARE Plus program in Port Pirie is an early intervention and family support service that aims to improve the development and wellbeing of children. We support students to continue to engage meaningfully in their education. On average, CARE Plus supported 25 children and young people each month in the last financial year. **yourtown's** Starfish program supports children and young people aged up to 18 years to improve their emotional health and wellbeing. We provide outreach early intervention and prevention support in the Moreton Bay and Logan communities. The program supported 270 families in the last financial year. **yourtown** is the Facilitating Partner for Deception Bay Communities for Children services. These community-based prevention and early intervention strategies support the development and wellbeing of children up to 12 years of age. In 2024-25, Coordinated Advocacy and Referral for Early Intervention assisted 114 families, Wolbai (a culturally safe, appropriate, and socially inclusive program that supports children and families) assisted 110 families, and Connected Families (which aims to strengthen parenting, wellbeing, and community connections for families) supported 182 families. **yourtown's** Penrose Young Parents Program in Port Pirie South Australia and Glugor Young Parents Program in Deception Bay Queensland provide practical parenting support to help with child development, life skills, and health and wellbeing activities in safe, supportive environments. In 2024-25, Penrose supported 45 parents and 42 children and Glugor supported 31 parents and 42 children.

Employment Services

For over 20 years **yourtown** has been delivering specialist youth employment services. Our employment services programs, including Transition to Work, Skilling Queenslanders for Work, and Get Back in the Game provide young people with training to expand their options and help them find sustainable employment. During 2024-25 almost 5,000 young people were supported in our employment services and programs in South Australia, Queensland, and New South Wales.

Social Enterprises

yourtown has worked with young people and employers to break down barriers to sustainable employment for 25 years. As a leader in work-based enterprises we provide young people at risk of long-term unemployment paid jobs in the following areas: construction, landscaping, and asset maintenance to help their transition to open employment. In 2024-25, almost 300 young people were employed in our social enterprises across South Australia, Queensland, and New South Wales.