

## Acting in the best interests of vulnerable children and youth

### Information for community service organisations and Child Protection practitioners

At the heart of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (CYFA) is a unifying set of 'best interests principles' that require family services, child protection and placement services to protect children from harm, protect their rights and promote their development in culturally, age and gender appropriate ways. The **Best Interests Framework for Vulnerable Children and Youth** has been developed to support a consistent understanding of these principles and their practice ramifications.

### Promoting positive outcomes for all children

The best interests principles of the CYFA build on the foundations of the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act* which provides an overarching framework for promoting positive outcomes for all children, emphasising that:

- All children should be given the opportunity to reach their full potential and participate in society.
- Whilst parents are the primary nurturers of a child, society as a whole shares responsibility for children's wellbeing and safety.
- Planning and delivery of services should focus on sustaining and improving children's outcomes, including their safety, health, development, learning and wellbeing.

A **Victorian Children's Outcomes Framework** has been developed to provide a common basis for setting objectives and planning across the whole of government. The outcomes framework sets out 35 aspects of child health and wellbeing, learning and development, and safety that are essential to all children. This framework also recognises that children do not achieve positive outcomes in these areas without the support of confident, capable parents, a strong community and a society which provides the services they need. For this reason, the outcomes framework relates to both the individual child and their social and family context.



### The Best Interests Principles of the CYFA

The **Best Interests Principles** provide guidance on how to promote positive outcomes for children who are vulnerable as a result of their family's circumstances, dynamics and social isolation. The principles recognise that where families that are under stress, extended family, local communities, community services and the State need to play a more active role in supporting parents and alternative carers to meet children's needs. Where parents are not able to provide an adequate level of care for their child – family services, child protection and placement services will augment direct care arrangements to ensure the child's needs can be met.

### The Best Interests Framework

A **Best Interests Framework** has been developed to help create a common language and a consistent approach to promoting the best interests of vulnerable children and youth across family services, child protection and placement services. The framework presents the best interests principles and associated provisions of the CYFA in a coherent policy and practice framework which puts the inter-related dimensions of the child's experience at the centre.

# The Best Interests Framework

## The child's experience

### Culture, age, gender and stage of life

#### *Cultural considerations*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture  
Culturally and Linguistically Diverse groups

#### *Age and stage of life:*

Infancy and pre-school years  
Primary school years  
Adolescence

### Safety

Basic care provided  
Protected from harm

### Stability

#### *Connection to primary caregiver*

Connection to family  
Connection to school and friends  
Connection to community  
Connection to culture

### Development

Health and growth  
Family and social relationships  
Education and learning  
Identity  
Emotional and behavioural development  
Self-care skills  
Social presentation

## Parent/carer capability

Providing basic care  
Ensuring safety  
Emotional warmth and responsiveness  
Guidance and boundaries  
Consistence and reliability  
Stimulating learning and development

## Family composition and dynamics

Family composition and relationships  
Family history and dynamics  
Involvement of extended family with the child

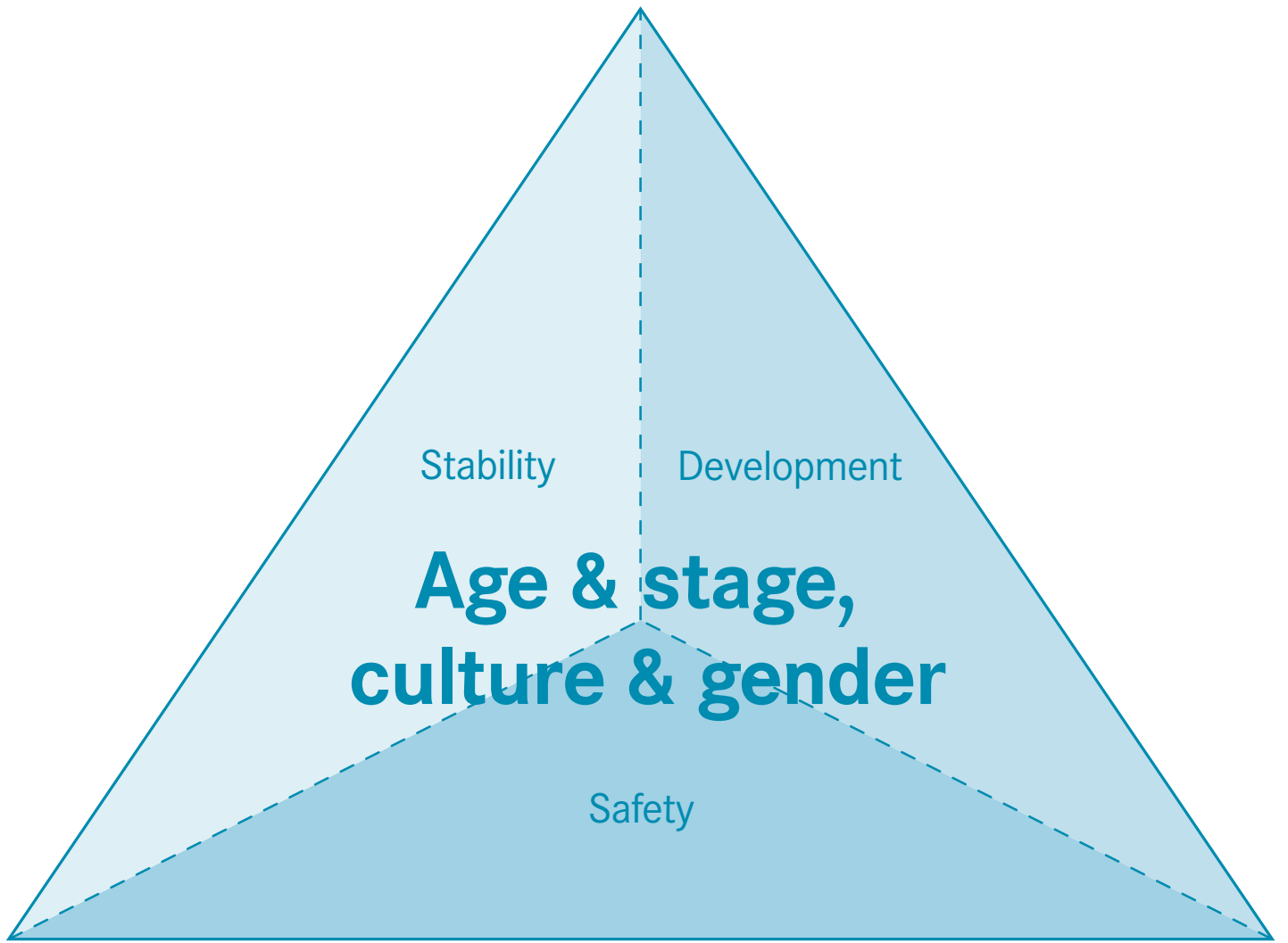
## Community participation, social and economic environment

Housing  
Employment  
Income  
Family's community participation  
Community resources

## Supports and services (service system responses)

A reliable network of services that intervene earlier and provide additional help  
Service collaboration  
High quality, evidence based service responses  
Empowering children and families in decision-making processes





The Best Interests Framework encourages a consistent focus on each of the four dimensions of a child's experience:

- culture, age, gender and stage of life
- safety
- stability
- development.

The framework also engenders consideration of the three key aspects of the child's family and social context that impact on the child:

- parent/carer capability to protect and promote a child's best interests
- family composition and dynamics that affect the child's best interests
- community participation and the social and economic environment that affects the child's best interests.

Finally the framework explores the implications of the Best Interests Principles for service design, development and delivery. Key provisions of the CYFA describe the role and responsibilities of family services, child protection and placement services and provide guidance on how these services should be organised and delivered to promote positive outcomes. Child-centred, family-sensitive practice will be promoted and supported through:

- a reliable network of services that intervene earlier and provide additional help to families when and where they need it
- service collaboration
- high quality, evidence based service responses
- empowering of children and families in decision-making processes.

The Best Interests Framework prompts all services operating under the CYFA to both start from and keep returning to the child's perspective. This perspective enables the widest possible assistance to be given, drawing on an understanding of the full impact of what has happened to a child so far, to determine what needs to happen in the future.

### **More information:**

For more information, factsheets and supporting documents, see the the every child every chance website: [www.dhs.vic.gov.au/everychildeverychance](http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/everychildeverychance)

### **Supporting documents:**

- Acting in the Best Interests of Vulnerable Children: Paper 1 – The Best Interests Framework for Vulnerable Children and Youth
- Acting in the Best Interests of Vulnerable Children: Paper 2 – Best Interests Principles: A conceptual overview
- Acting in the Best Interests of Vulnerable Children: Paper 3 – Cumulative harm: A conceptual overview (forthcoming)
- Acting in the Best Interests of Vulnerable Children: Paper 4 – Stability: A conceptual overview (forthcoming)

These introductory papers will be followed by practice guidance and tools, which will provide more detail about the implications of the Best Interests Framework for the way that practitioners in family services, child protection and placement services go about their day to day work with children and families.