







## A Snapshot of Children's Voices for Change: Co-researching with Children and Young People as Family Violence Experts by Experience

*“Being a victim-survivor of family violence is like being in bushfire. Some things are horrifically burnt and won't be coming back, but there is new growth that happens. It won't be the same, but it takes a long time.”*

# Introduction

*Children's Voices for Change* is a research project aiming to better understand the support and recovery needs of children and young people in Victoria, Australia aged up to 13 years who have experienced family violence. The project explores what is working well, what could be done better, and where the gaps are between what children and young people tell us they need from services and what services are doing now. There are four main stages of the project:

-  Analysing data and learning from the research that is already out there.
-  A survey for workers providing services to children and young people to hear their perspective on what could be working better.
-  An interactive online activity for children and young people to share their experiences of the family violence system.
-  A series of workshops to develop and test a Children's Feedback Tool.

Throughout various stages of this project, we as young advocates have worked alongside the researchers and young victim survivors of family violence. We created a Youth Advisory Group, we influenced the online Children's Activity to ensure it is accessible, and took part in a series of workshops with children and young people to develop the Children's Feedback Tool.

Typically, the story of children and young people's experiences of family violence is told by professionals. Children and young people with a lived experience are usually the subjects of the research, talked about but not seen as a partner that holds equal expertise. We wanted to shift this narrative to better understand children and young people's experiences of family violence. We must collaborate with lived expertise to ensure research is safe, meaningful, and accurate.

# Our three guiding principles

Here are our three guiding principles for working with youth advocates, to help overcome some of the ongoing, systemic barriers we have experienced:

## **1** Set the agenda together

Research projects are often rushed due to tight timelines and funding constraints. This makes it very difficult for children and young people with lived experience to be embedded in the project and to meaningfully share their expertise as participants, co-researchers and co-authors. Being asked to step into a project where the research agenda, questions and methods have already been set doesn't give space for lived experience to influence the process. Research projects about children and young people should have those with lived experience involved at all stages, from the initial idea and ethics processes, to interpreting and presenting the data, and everything in between. We understand the perspectives of children and young people going through family violence because we have experienced it ourselves. We are the only ones who can help researchers understand if a project is accessible to young people like us. It is important for researchers to use curiosity as a tool to learn from our experiences and perspectives.

## **2** Create and hold space and time

Children and young people, especially those who have experienced or are currently experiencing family violence, have a lot of weight on their shoulders. We can be juggling school, work, advocacy, and navigating our experiences of trauma, which can feel very overwhelming. It can also be difficult revisiting old memories and reflecting on our experiences of abuse and violence. We may still be living the impacts of family violence. This means we may need to have some time and space away from the research project. It may also mean that we don't reply to some emails or text messages, but this doesn't always mean that we don't want to be involved.

It is important when working with children and young people in research that you create and hold space and time for us to be involved in whatever capacity works best. We also appreciate the flexibility to step in and out of the research as we need. Prioritising our safety and wellbeing means research will take longer.



### Side by side

Most of the spaces we enter as young advocates are not accessible. Being in the space with other children and young people with lived experience means that we aren't fighting on our own. We are doing it together. This makes us feel safer and more comfortable to share our knowledge and expertise. When we share stories of our lived experience, they resonate with other young advocates: we understand each other. Ideally, there would be one space that is accessible for everyone, rather than having young people off to the side in a separate advisory group. We would be sharing the space, the power and the decision-making. But there needs to be the readiness among adults to make the space more accessible and youth-friendly. This includes not expecting young people to have the same background knowledge and context about the system; and ensuring that we can show up just as we are, and not have to change to try to fit into an adult-controlled space.

When professionals share power, platforms and space with young people who have lived experience of family violence, we can write our own narratives and change the course of the story for other children and young people. By stepping into the uncomfortable space of not being the expert, we can truly partner together and learn from each other.

**If our advocacy helps even one child or young person,  
it will all be worth it.**