

Chair's Message

As Chairperson of the Board of Relationships Australia Inc, I acknowledge the Traditional Owners on whose countries we live and operate. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and pay tribute to their enduring stewardship of this country.



The 2020-21 financial year has presented ongoing challenges and hardship for our clients, as the country continues to grapple with the impacts of COVID-19. Rolling lockdowns, border closures and numerous delta variant outbreaks have contributed to the uncertainty, frustration and stress that many Australians are experiencing.

Throughout this difficult year, we have continued to see the strength that people draw from their relationships, both within families and with their broader community. The presence of supportive, respectful relationships has proven to be a crucial foundation for our mental health, general wellbeing, and overall resilience.

Relationships Australia's work with clients this year has continued to focus on this, delivering dynamic, adaptive services to build capacity and help people navigate the discomfort and pressure that the COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted on their relationships.

The National Board of Relationships Australia celebrates the expertise, passion and commitment of our workforce across the country. Staff connection to community and client-focused services are the bases of our service quality, ensuring that Relationships Australia remains a trusted and responsive source of support for so many Australians.

Relationships Australia staff and volunteers have continued to put clients' needs at the centre, while adapting services to meet the changing COVID-19 restrictions. In doing so, staff and volunteers have exhibited their own resilience and strength.

Meanwhile, the Federation has maintained its commitment to research, data collection and evaluation to ensure that our work is informed by the most up-to-date knowledge.

We have used our internal research and analysis to inform decision makers about quality relationship services as well as comment on numerous government policy strategies. We enjoy positive working relationships with stakeholders at both the State and Federal levels, and our teams work tirelessly to achieve the best possible services and outcomes for clients and their communities.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the staff of the National Office for their work on behalf of the Federation members. I would also like to acknowledge the skills and commitment shared generously by my CEO colleagues and their Boards, who comprise the Federation. This input underpins the successful work of the Federation and the National Office.

This annual report explores some of the key themes and activities that have defined the Federation in 2020-21. This is only a snapshot of some of Relationship Australia's many achievements in this difficult year and it highlights our ongoing commitment to assist Australians to thrive during adversity.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Claire Ralfs".

Dr Claire Ralfs
Chairperson

Year in Review

The ongoing challenges presented by the global COVID-19 pandemic continue to play havoc with the lives of all Australians. Increased measures to combat the virus, including extended lockdowns and border closures, has led to additional pressures on individuals and their relationships generally.

During this challenging time in our history Relationships Australia has continued to provide much needed supports and services across the country. Respectful relationships are paramount to better physical and mental health outcomes, and greater general wellbeing.

Whilst we don't know how long the additional pressures of the pandemic will last or how large the impact of these pressures will be, we do know that the strength and support that we draw from those around us is crucial.

We also know from research that the strength of our connections, and respectful relationships, combat the public health issues of social isolation and loneliness.

Relationships Australia continues to work for all Australians to uphold respectful relationships at every level.



Nick Tebby
National Executive Officer

Services supporting diverse Australians

With the above in mind, the mission of the Relationships Australia federation remains critical and our work across the 2020-21 financial year has been directed at supporting all Australians to maintain safe and respectful relationships: with themselves, their families and the broader community.

Relationships Australia members provide services for all members of the community, regardless of religious belief, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural background or economic circumstances. We acknowledge and respect the rights of all people, in all their diversity, to live life fully within their families and communities with dignity and safety.

This year, new specialist support services have been rolled out across the country, and in April 2021, Relationships Australia was named as the national service provider for Intercountry Adoptee and Family Support Services by the Department of Social Services. We welcome the opportunity to support this diverse group of clients, and their families, and thank the Department for entrusting us with this service.

The year saw us continue critical work supporting clients affected by the Disability Royal Commission. These services, funded by the Department of Social Services, deliver dedicated counselling and other support to Australians living with a disability who have suffered trauma, neglect or abuse, and their support people.

We have also continued our focus on Senior Relationship Services across the country, offering a variety of services that assist older people and their families to prevent and resolve family conflict and reduce the risk of elder abuse. We were grateful to the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department for additional funding across four Relationships Australia member organisations to ensure greater outreach to regional and remote clients, and to focus efforts on reducing the risk of financial abuse of older Australians.

Improving access to Family Law services

The 2020-21 financial year has seen increased activity in the family law sector, with ongoing reviews at the departmental and parliamentary levels. We have continued our advocacy for policy and systems improvements to enhance early access for families to the necessary support services, and place the safety and well-being of families at the centre of all family law matters. Opportunities for advocacy in this space have included:

- > Submission to Treasury on superannuation information sharing for family law proceedings
- > Submission to the review of the ban on direct cross-examination in family law matters
- > Submission to Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs – Bill to create Federal Family Violence Orders
- > Appearing before the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee in relation to the merger of the Federal Circuit Court of Australia and the Family Court of Australia

As a leading provider of family dispute resolution and counselling services for over seventy years, Relationships Australia has the experience and expertise to advocate on behalf of our clients and the broader community on these critical issues.

We welcome the work of the Family Court of Australia on the roll-out of the Lighthouse Project, an initiative designed to support family law clients to ensure risk and safety needs are identified as a matter of primary importance, and referrals to appropriate support services can be made without delay. We look forward to seeing the extension of this pilot over the coming years.

This year we also welcomed much-needed additional funding in the Commonwealth Budget for services and interventions designed to address the scourge of family violence in society. Our work with families, victims and perpetrators of family violence demonstrates that through a combination of early intervention, therapeutic support and crisis services, Australian families can be better protected, and family violence can be addressed.



Increasing social connections across Australia to address loneliness

We are proud to be a founding member of Ending Loneliness Together, a coalition of like-minded organisations, academic institutions and individuals whose aim is to reduce loneliness in Australia. The ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has rendered this work more important than ever.

As part of the campaign to end loneliness, we supported the development of a crucial White Paper in 2020 and the launch of the Parliamentary Friends of Ending Loneliness (co-chaired by Dr Fiona Martin MP and Mr Andrew Giles MP) in March 2021.

Relationships Australia's national Neighbour Day campaign is an example of community intervention in action. It mobilises all Australians at the local level to build and maintain connections, and through acts of neighbourliness, to help prevent loneliness across the country. Our research partnership with the Australian National University has provided evidence of the effectiveness of Neighbour Day in supporting community connection and, in doing so, improving mental well-being and reducing loneliness, even more so in a time of isolation and frustration. You can read further about Neighbour Day on the following pages.

Advocacy

During 2020-21, Relationships Australia engaged with a range of Parliamentary Inquiries, Royal Commissions and government consultations. Drawing on the expertise and experience of practitioners across the country, and building on evidence collected over 70 years of delivering services to vulnerable Australians, we were proud to make contributions to the following:

- > The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence
- > Royal Commission into Aged Care
- > Joint Select Committee on Implementation of the National Redress Scheme
- > Joint Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention
- > Attorney-General's Department on the proposal to create a national register of enduring instruments
- > Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications and the Australian Communications and Media Authority in relation to their respective inquiries into interactive gambling in Australia. Our focus on the impact of gambling on relationships and mental health is informed by years of delivering services to clients with problem gambling across multiple states and territories.

We look forward to further opportunities to engage with policymakers in the design of services and systems that put the well-being of the individual at the core, and promote safe and respectful relationships as a crucial foundation of Australian society.



Key stakeholder engagements

Over the past year, we participated in a range of consultations in the Attorney-General's and Social Services departments and with stakeholders in our traditional areas of work. These have included consultations on program redesign and outcome measurement, as well as increasing access to services for vulnerable groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, culturally and linguistically diverse clients, clients with disability and those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key consultation engagements include:

- > **Department of Social Services**
Multiple advisory group sessions on the future development of Families and Children Activities funded by the Department
- > **Attorney General's Department**
Elder Abuse Service Trials capability workshop
- > **Family Relationship Services Australia**
Informing and collaborating with our peak body on advocacy, policy and service-related issues
- > **Elder Abuse Action Australia**
Standing member of Advisory Board
- > **Disability Royal Commission**
Forum on the intersection between disability and family violence for clients from CALD backgrounds
- > **Suicide Prevention Australia**
Consultation on the development of a workplace competency framework.

Others include the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Mental Health Australia, Older Persons Advocacy Network, Every Age Counts and the Australian Council of Social Services.

On issues impacting the work of Relationships Australia and the broader sector, Relationships Australia has engaged in ongoing advocacy with relevant departments and politicians including the Minister for Social Services, the Attorney General, and the Minister for Aged Care, and we thank them for their time and commitment to our sector.

Most notably, we acknowledge the government's commitment in the 2020-21 Budget, handed down in October 2020, to guarantee ongoing funding for the community sector. In response to the impending cessation of the Social and Community Services Pay Equity Special Account, the government has committed to allocate additional base funding for a workforce that provides much needed support to vulnerable Australians.

International Research Study

In November 2020 Relationships Australia joined an international research collaboration led by the University of Worcester UK in collaboration with School of Human Services and Social Work, Griffith University and Relate UK. The study, *Families Un-locked: Relationships Emerging from COVID-19 into the 'New Normal'*, is an independent long-term study about how individuals and families are coping and adapting to the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Phase 1 of the study was conducted in both Australia and the United Kingdom and preliminary results can be viewed on our website.

Findings from Phase 1 in Australia include:

- > Approximately a **quarter of couples** felt that lockdowns put a strain on their relationship
- > **One in five couples (20%)** reported that worrying about the pandemic caused tension in their relationships
- > **A third (33%)** of respondents felt that money worries had added additional pressures on their relationships
- > **Only 13%** of the couples reported that the lockdown had a negative impact, worsening their already struggling relationships
- > The **vast majority** of parents reported enjoying spending time with their children during lockdown
- > **75%** felt overwhelmed by the childcare responsibilities and have been anxious about their children's education
- > **Just over half** of the couples felt that lockdown has been a positive experience for them
- > **50%+** couples reported that following lockdown they felt they were closer than before.



2020

Local Research

Relationships Australia runs surveys throughout the year on topics of relevance to our clients and all Australians. Results from these surveys inform further understanding around key areas of interest at timely points in Australia's history. This past year has again looked at the various effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the important topics of; mental health and relationships, and, ageism.

June

Ageism, caring for the elderly and the abuse of older people

This survey found that many respondents know someone who has been abused in their old age, yet few know what to do about this issue. It also showed that people recognise blatant forms of ageism, however some more subtle ageist views prevail and that our perceptions of care-giving roles appear worse than other caregivers' actual experiences.

- > **61%** of respondents think that the abuse of older people is common in Australia. This is up from 2016, where only **25%** showed concern for the issue (in a similar survey conducted by Relationships Australia),
- > **48%** of respondents were unsure of where to seek help. These figures remained the same even for those who had previous experience with the abuse of older people,
- > **77%** of carers enjoy their role, whereas only **62%** of future carers were looking forward to their role.

August

Mental health and relationships

This survey explored respondents' ability to recognise and respond to mental ill-health, their help-seeking patterns and the effect mental health has on intimate relationships. It found that people are more capable of recognising their own mental ill-health, but feel more comfortable discussing and addressing another's mental health. It also found that while partners are an important source of support, mental health issues can significantly affect the health of an intimate relationship.

- > **99%** of respondents felt confident in addressing another's mental ill-health. However, less than **60%** of respondents thought they would receive tangible support when discussing their mental health with people close to them,
- > **66%** prefer to seek professional help in person, while only **19%** would seek professional help online,
- > **64%** of respondents indicated that they would seek help from 'people close to them', yet **45%** said they felt 'uncomfortable' or 'very uncomfortable' talking to one or more of their close contacts about their mental health.



September

Oct-Nov

2021

Jun-Jul

Cyberbullying

This survey explored parents awareness of cyberbullying in comparison to other mental health challenges and their help-seeking beliefs and practices. It found that the majority of parents are not confident in identifying or responding to signs of a mental health problem in their child, highlighting the continued need for awareness and increased capacity building.

- > **97%** of respondents think the parents of the perpetrator were responsible for addressing cyberbullying, **89%** thought the parents of the victim were responsible,
- > **Most people** felt that COVID-19 had an effect on cyberbullying; **70%** agreed that the move to online learning had increased children's vulnerability to cyberbullying,
- > **Two-thirds** of respondents felt that it was the school's responsibility to track additional communications across platforms.

The pandemic, self-care, positivity and people's hope for the future

This survey sought to investigate the relationship between the pandemic, self-care, positivity and people's hope for the future. It found that while self-care is a popular form of caring for our physical, emotional and mental health, respondents' hopefulness about the future is not significantly affected by either self-care routines or state-based experiences of the pandemic.

- > The more people practise self-care, the more likely they were to report its positive effects,
- > **70%** of respondents reported positive outcomes arising out of the pandemic,
- > The most common positive outcomes included the ability to work from home, spending more time with children and family and an increased 'appreciation for the smaller things'.

Enduring changes to home life due to the pandemic

Sixteen months since restrictions were introduced in Australia, and twelve months since we completed our COVID-19 and its effects on relationships series, this survey explored the positive and negative changes people have experienced to their home-life since the pandemic.

- > **50%** of respondents said they think differently about their role living in the community,
- > **58%** of respondents said they had a different appreciation or understanding of their mental health,
- > **54%** said they have had to reassess their, or their family's, priorities.

Where you can find more information

For more information on the work that we do please visit: relationships.org.au or call us on 02 6162 9300.

National Statistics



2,407
STAFF



106
LOCATIONS



39+
RURAL/REMOTE
LOCATIONS



138+
OUTREACH
LOCATIONS



515+
PROGRAMS
OFFERED



25+
SUBMISSIONS



300+
MEDIA
PARTICIPATIONS



50+
RESEARCH
PROJECTS



30+
FILMS



90+
ENGAGEMENT CAMPAIGNS
AND ACTIVITIES

Relationships Australia

Responding to loneliness in Australia

Loneliness is a complex social problem, which stems from a lack of, or a limited number of positive and respectful relationships, often caused by experiences of exclusion due to structural and systemic social realities.

Loneliness is primarily understood as an emotional response to discontented feelings about the quality or quantity of our connections. Relationships Australia is invested in supporting respectful and sustainable relationships and therefore preventing loneliness and understanding its causes is a key part of our work.

Loneliness is seen as a precursor to poorer mental health outcomes, including increased suicidality and has often been contextualised as a public health concern, by both Relationships Australia research and other sources¹.

In order to address loneliness, we must address the social barriers which inhibit social connection. Loneliness, therefore, requires a social response and community-based solutions. These include raising awareness and empowering communities to address loneliness, and building capacity of individuals to create sustainable and respectful social connections.

As a social connection campaign Neighbour Day is a solutions-focused social response that places individual experiences within a larger social context and helps to de-stigmatise loneliness by addressing the social causes and systemic barriers to connection.

 neighbour day

REACHED OVER

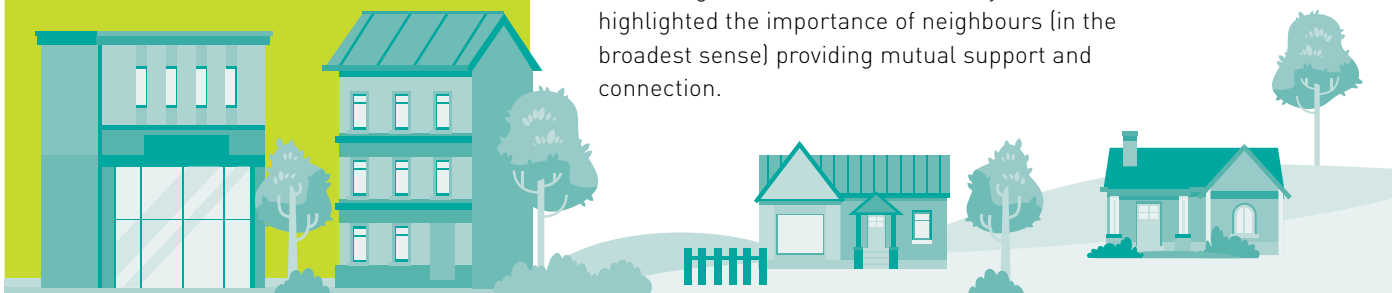
330,000

people in Australian communities in 2021

Neighbour Day is officially celebrated on the last Sunday in March each year; however, the purpose of the campaign is to raise national awareness of the importance of social connection and neighbourly actions throughout the year.

In a time when our relationships are under great pressure, with continued uncertainty arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions and lockdowns, Neighbour Day continues to empower Australians to build and maintain sustainable connections with those in their community. The pandemic (together with other natural disasters across Australia) has changed how we view community and highlighted the importance of neighbours (in the broadest sense) providing mutual support and connection.

Neighbour Day is Relationships Australia's social connection campaign which addresses loneliness by empowering Australians to create the community they would like to live in.



1. Mance 2018; AIHW 2019



At the same time, these events have placed increased pressure on individuals, families and communities across the country.

Key activities undertaken by Australians during the 2021 Neighbour Day campaign included:



Community gatherings (including barbecues, social gatherings, shared meals and street parties)



Workshops and community activities (including gardening, bicycle maintenance and cooking)



Check-ins and catch-ups with neighbours (including vulnerable neighbours, done in a covid safe way).



Virtual social connection



COSTA GEORGIADIS

Neighbour Day Ambassador



“Getting to know your neighbours over a cuppa or a barbie can lead to lifelong friendships or just feeling more secure in your neighbourhood.

I see friendships formed over community gardens week in and week out. Verge gardens, pocket parks, laneways...you name it. Families, kids, adults and elders are nurturing their environment and growing things for the birds, insects and people to share. It's not just the plants that are growing in the garden, people are too. They are connecting with one another, all ages together.”

Research conducted on behalf of Relationships Australia by the Australian National University shows us that 85% of participants got to know their neighbours better as a result of their involvement with Neighbour Day and 99% of these relationships have continued beyond Neighbour Day 2020².

Neighbour Day involvement has led to a reliable and sustained reduction in loneliness in participants, even after a significant increase during 2020².

63% of participants reported improvement to their mental health because of their involvement in Neighbour Day². This confirmed findings from 2018 and 2019 research.

With these findings in mind, Relationships Australia has adopted the theme: “Every Day is Neighbour Day” and, with amazing support from our Neighbour Day ambassadors, our group of Very Neighbourly Organisations (VNOs) and other individuals and organisations around Australia, we engaged in a public campaign to celebrate and motivate social connection within communities.

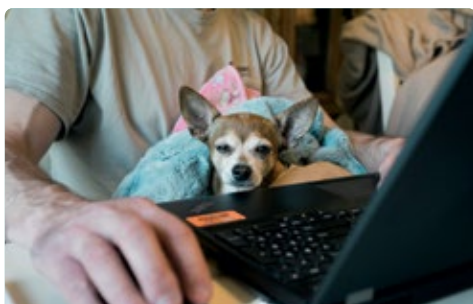
63%
of participants reported
IMPROVEMENT
to their **MENTAL HEALTH**



By coming together to celebrate communities, all Australians contribute to a society that is well-connected and imbued with mutual support and respectful relationships. As a result, Australian communities are more resilient in the face of crises, and Australians’ mental well-being is supported through a sense of belonging and connection with those around them.

For more information, and to join Relationships Australia in our 20th Anniversary celebration of Neighbour Day in 2022, visit www.neighbourday.org

Neighbour Day 2021 Highlights



My #CreativeConnections Video Competition

Together with a number of our Very Neighbourly Organisations, members of the Australia community submitted video tips for staying connected during COVID-19 restrictions. This saw entries from across the country and enabled us to share tips with the broader community.



NATALIE AHMAT

Neighbour Day Ambassador

Community awareness raising

With support from some of our wonderful Neighbour Day Ambassadors and Very Neighbourly Organisations, we were able to share great stories of connection across social media, radio and on television with generous support of the SBS Community Foundation.

2. Cruwys et al. 2021



Tell Us Your Story

Each year we call on Australians to tell us how they celebrate their local community. This year we received heart-warming stories of neighbourly connection that occurs on every day of the year. Our national winning entry for 2020 was from NSW, and showed us all that during even the toughest times, there's opportunity for connection and a laugh.

Connecting our street and having a bit of a laugh

"We don't always see our neighbours, but each year at Christmas, we get together for a street catchup so that we know who lives around us, and we can help each other out if needed. Our street is cross-generational and cultural, and we all get on really well, but often don't have the time to have meaningful conversations throughout the year.

At the Christmas 2019 street drinks, some of the men in the street made a pact. That they would mow the lawn in dress ups for the year. At first, it was a bit of a laugh that we thought would last two weeks. But, as the year progressed and Covid hit, it became the highlight of the weekends. Even our quietest neighbour got out there in his daughter's Minnie Mouse outfit! The street saw a man in a full tux mowing, a skier, a lifesaver, a snorkeler (the street probably saw too much that time!), Scooby-Doo, a hot dog, a koala and many more. It really brought our community together and gave us a laugh in a tough time.

Following the mowing event, we also implemented driveway drinks. Tea or wine on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, socially distanced, hollering across the street. As tough as last year was, we have really gotten to know our neighbours much better, and feel like we can call on them anytime if we need. And the memories of those mowing days bring a smile to our faces".



Photo courtesy of Brodie Weeding

Communities Connected

Communities Connected aimed to shine a light on the many community organisations that connect people and help people stay connected, often with limited resources, every day of the year. People were encouraged to nominate those organisations doing amazing work in communities across Australia. The Founder of Neighbour Day, Andrew Heslop, kindly donated the major prize – an LG Entertainment Package. While Relationships Australia received many high quality nominations from around the country, the most outstanding entry came from Live Well Tasmania.

Living well in Tasmania

Live Well Tasmania fosters connection across northwest Tasmania with an aim to decrease social isolation and improve health and wellbeing. Running a variety of activities for members of its community, Live Well Tasmania uses a range of programs across different mediums to bring people together.

In addition to its dedicated drop-in service, the centre runs classes, group activities and other initiatives that prove that even a small community can find ways of connecting and supporting each other when times are tough.

On Tuesday 4 May 2021, Live Well Tasmania was presented with the major prize, generously donated by Andrew Heslop and LG, by Relationships Australia Tasmania CEO Dr Michael Kelly, and Relationships Australia National Executive Officer, Nick Tebbey.



This year around the country

Canberra and Region

Locations



9

Clients



12,563

Staff



160



Got Your Back – Supporting Young People

Got Your Back is a group program delivered by Relationships Australia Canberra and Region (RACR). The program provides support to young (12-25 year old) people living in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and surrounding areas, who have been impacted by family and domestic violence. Through the program we provide participants a safe space to come together, feel supported and to meet with other young people their age who have similar experience. This helps to create connection through respectful relationships and peer support, and reduces isolation.

The group was founded using community specific insights gathered through a project led by the ACT Human Rights Commission. *Got Your Back* has taken these insights and implemented them into a young person led, restorative, trauma-informed group. This means our groups are responsive to young people's needs and flexible and adaptable as required. Participants choose the topics they would like to speak about or learn about. The group provides them with a safe space to learn about topics such as respectful relationships, emotion coping, and the impacts of trauma. We also invite experts into the group so the young people can learn about specific topics such as the legal system and its intersection with family and domestic violence or keeping themselves safe from financial abuse.



"[I have learned] my boundaries and how to deal with them"

– 12 year old participant

Got Your Back is a safe space for LGBTQIA+ young people, young people from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or CALD backgrounds, and young people with disabilities. Some of the young people who we have connected with are neurodiverse, have mental health issues, and complexity in their lives, which is compounded by trauma associated with their experiences. We have designed the group to be accessible to participants of all abilities with activities being tailored to a wide range of communicative and cognitive capacity. This includes providing sensory toys to the young people, which allows those with disabilities, mental health issues, and trauma to stay regulated and calm throughout the session.

Based on the evaluation feedback we have received - *Got Your Back* has produced overwhelmingly positive outcomes for the young people participating in the program. Our results show that almost all participants state a very positive improvement on all outcome metrics and are highly satisfied with the experience and the program.



Participants self-reported:

- > a **49%** increase in feeling they have a network of support they can talk to about the violence,
- > a **40%** increase in feelings of safety at home,
- > an **83%** increase in feelings of being able to cope, and,
- > a **69%** increase in feeling that they are able to manage their feelings around what's happening.



"[The group] managed to sort out issues we have been asking the school about for 3 years"

- 14 year old participant



This year around the country

New South Wales

Locations



15

Clients

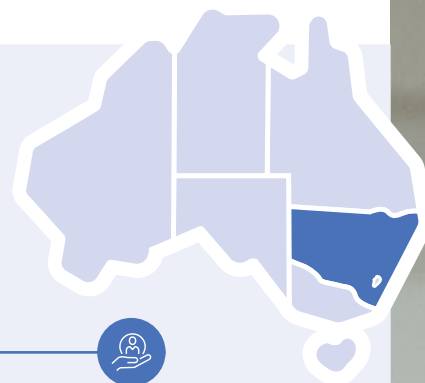


21,382

Staff



457



Providing adult trauma services through COVID and beyond

Relationships Australia NSW has a proud history of supporting those who were in out-of-home care as a child. This began 17 years ago with a small but important program known as the *Aftercare Resource Centre*, which continues to help 16 to 25 year olds transition to independent living. As we have never been an out-of-home care provider, or affiliated with associated institutions or churches, we are in a strong position to support young adults who have had an out-of-home care experience. Our long commitment to social justice and equity is central to the support we offer these clients.

Our Wattle Place centre opened in March 2011 to broaden our support for clients in need. Over the past decade, our scope has grown to include the *Find and Connect Support Service* and the *Forced Adoption Service*, which help clients who have been in out-of-home care through counselling, referrals, record access, and assistance with health and wellbeing costs, casework, advocacy and family tracing. More recently we have added the *National Redress Support Service* to our offering, for those impacted by or engaged with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

At the heart of what we offer these groups is connection and belonging. This is reflected through our calendar of social activities and

our drop-in centre, where clients know they can come for support at any time. As such, many remain connected well beyond the period when they have been actively receiving support.

During the year we held a number of social events to keep the community connected, and so that trust and safety can build – two of the key underpinning principles in trauma informed care. One of the most valuable was at Christmas, which can be such a triggering time for many who use our services. Wattle Place held our own “family” event to ensure our clients were able to experience the joy of celebration, complete with a meal and karaoke.

Around 1,200 people access our Wattle Place services each year.

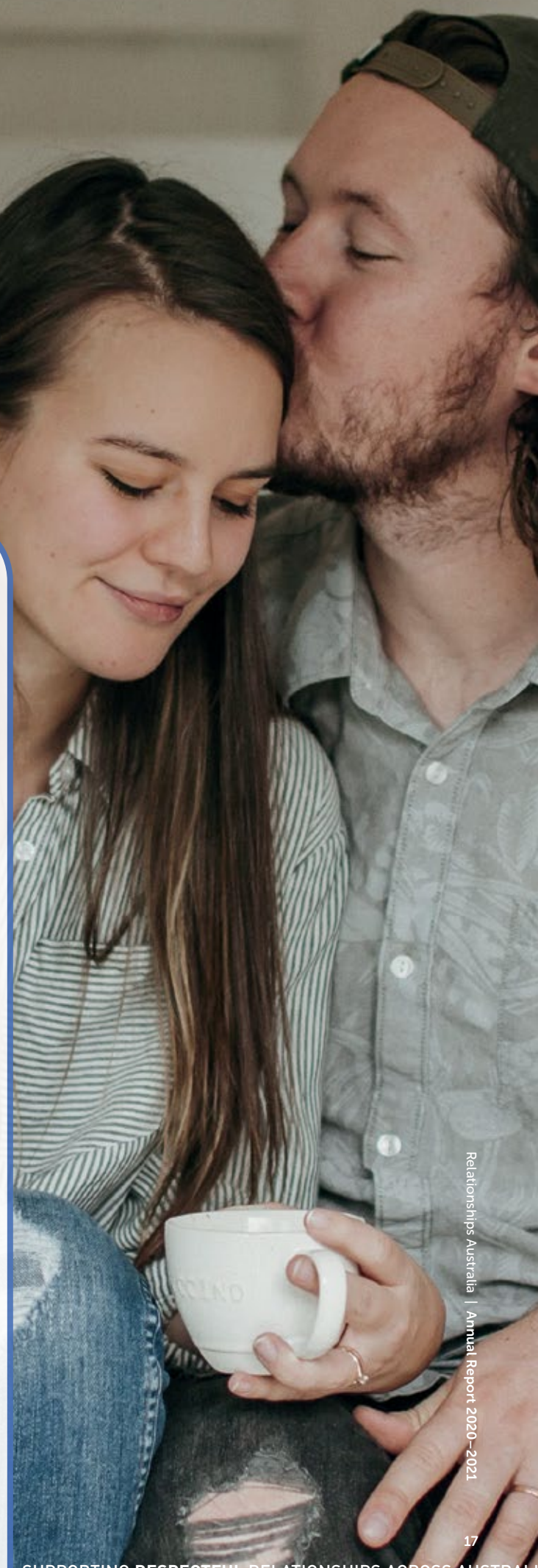
- > 21% identify as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent or learn of their history through their records and family tracing work,
- > 90% are Forgotten Australians,
- > 10% experienced Forced Adoption,
- > 45% are from regional NSW and 55% from metropolitan Sydney.



COVID-19 restrictions presented a number of challenges for people with a childhood out-of-home care experience, and other trauma experiences that impact their trust in institutions. The Wattle Place service model has always had a blend of face-to-face service delivery and phone or video.

To maintain connection and reduce trauma in isolation we provided wellbeing calls for all who had accessed our services in the past. Additionally, we worked to build people's digital capacity as we moved to online connection groups. Many clients re-engaged over the lockdown periods, and we were pleased that they told us they felt valued by someone caring to check on their wellbeing.

At a recent event, one of the community members spoke of their experience of feeling welcomed at Wattle Place without judgment and finding a place where they felt they belonged. It's a wonderful thing to be able to support and witness.



This year around the country

Northern Territory

Locations



3

Clients



4,207

Staff



78



Supporting people through the Disability Royal Commission

It's been a year of growth for our Disability Royal Commission Counselling and Support Service. After a slow and challenging start due to COVID, the program is now fully staffed and services clients across the Northern Territory.

The service delivery is specific to the needs of the community, as each person's story and intervention is unique and complex. Many times client sessions will take place in the community or client's homes. There has also been ground-breaking work done with people in prisons, where some clients have found ways to express their vulnerabilities for the first time. At times counsellors are working together with other services at Relationships Australia, providing reliable and holistic support for the person or family.

Preparing submissions is a challenging task for people wanting to tell their stories to the Royal Commission. Stories involve many areas of life and a diversity of service providers, sometimes over many years.

We support clients in many different ways, including:

- > working through traumatic incidences or long-term stressors,
- > structuring and recording the story,
- > preparing documents, and
- > liaising with the Royal Commission.

We often work closely with legal and advocacy services for the Disability Royal Commission. Staff also provide support to deal with current emotional and practical challenges. There is a need for good service knowledge, compassion and flexibility.

In our recruitment, we have been both selective and opportunistic. We have been able to create a cohesive, highly skilled and dedicated team. We are particularly proud of our pioneering work employing people with lived experience. Two of our staff members live with a disability, and one staff member has been caring for a family member who lives with a disability, for more than 35 years. They have extensive experience engaging and advocating with government and non-government services for disability, aged care and mental health.

Our staff members with lived experience also have qualifications in counselling, mental health and peer support. The concept of using lived experience is well-known for Aboriginal workers across our organisation. Nationally, a lived experience workforce is well-established in the mental health and disability sector.



Our client base has grown significantly over the past year, despite the challenges in raising awareness of the Disability Royal Commission and our support service. Our Promotions Officer has worked efficiently to reach service providers and the wider community. This includes TV, radio and social media campaigns, outdoor advertising, various community events and outreach at local organisations.

Recently the Disability Royal Commission announced an extension until September 2023. We are hoping that we will assist people throughout this time and beyond to contribute to positive changes in the lives of people living with disabilities.



This year around the country

Queensland

Locations



23

Clients



72,657

Staff



467



Empowering older Australians to exercise their human rights

Relationships Australia Queensland (RAQ) is helping vulnerable older Australians navigate changes to important legislation aimed to support their human rights and protect them from abuse.

In November 2020, Queensland's guardianship laws were revised for the first time in fifteen years. As part of this revision, the process of applying for the Power of Attorney was updated.

The Power of Attorney gives someone the right to act on your behalf, and many older people choose to give a trusted family member or friend this responsibility. However, all too often, older people find themselves in a vulnerable position, with up to 14% experiencing elder abuse in any given year.

Power of Attorney can play a key role in this abuse. For example, the trusted person can withdraw the older person's funds without their consent and use them for their own benefit. Changes to the legislation were developed based on an adult's human right to participate in their own decision-making and aim to increase older people's safety.

RAQ has responded to further protect older persons by establishing five regional virtual Elder Abuse Networks. These networks bring together multiple social services to share knowledge and develop a unified response, facilitating the delivery of clear, consistent, detailed information to older people about their rights.

Regular network meetings provide a space to explore the causes of elder abuse and develop inclusive activities to change social attitudes and prevent violence against older people.

By partnering with Community Legal Centres and other network members, our Senior Relationship Services have delivered numerous events, helping raise awareness of elder abuse in our communities.



Elder Abuse Prevention Networks have been running bi-monthly in each region and consistently enjoy strong community representation, with 10-20 different services attending each session.

The combination of strengthened legislation and partnerships formed across these networks are changing the way we respond to elder abuse. The community is more informed than ever about the impact of elder abuse and better equipped to support our most vulnerable Queenslanders.



This year around the country

South Australia

Locations



6

Clients



16,882

Staff



376



Ngartuitya Family Group Conferencing: old ways, new time

Relationships Australia South Australia (RASA) launched our Ngartuitya Family Group Conference (NFGC) service in January 2020.

Ngartuitya (nar too it yah) is a Kurna word meaning *for the children*. Kurna is the name of the traditional owners of the land that most of our offices are situated on. The name reflects the service's child-and family-led approach, empowering families and identifying strategies to keep children and young people safe within family and kin.

The Department for Child Protection (DCP) works closely with the NFGC service, referring families who have children with complex wellbeing and safety concerns.

The service works with the extended family, including significant friends and neighbours, to address issues such as substance abuse, self-harm, mental illness, and family and domestic violence.

Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dispute resolution practices shape NFGC service delivery. Its implementation has demonstrated how beneficial this practice is for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal families.

All NFGC coordinators receive three-day intensive training in the Ngartuitya Family Group Conference method at RASA's RTO, the Australian Institute of Social Relations. It was designed by Sarah Decrea, RASA's Practice Manager of Family-Led Decision-Making, and Paul Nixon, an international expert in restorative practice and child protection.

The training equips NFGC coordinators with culturally safe, child-centric, and trauma-informed approaches to bring families together. They learn how to support families to explore issues and find their own resolutions. At the time of publication, a total of 58 people have completed the training.

The coordinators make preparations before the conference to strengthen the child's voice. Key to these preparations is being aware of what adult problems are causing concerns for children. The coordinators create a *safe circle* where the child can share their worries and experiences with their families and support network. For some families, this is the first time hearing their child's experience. It is in the safe circle where families make real change.

NFGC strengthens family networks to focus on the needs of the child and problem-solve together. Clear and pragmatic agreements among family members ensures safe, permanent, and stable care arrangements for children, thereby reducing risk of child removal.



Since launching, the NFGC service has completed more than 91 conferences and drawn up 88 agreements. Notably, 186 children have had their voices heard on issues relating to them.

The NFGC service has demonstrated families can achieve sustainable solutions to protect and parent children when they take the lead in the decision-making process. Families report that the opportunity to make crucial decisions about keeping their children safe strengthens the whole family. And families who previously had a child removed report experiencing a sense of relief. DCP social workers also agree that the NFGC process supports families to develop safe and protective plans.

Finally, we are proud to report that NFGC is expanding to meet the needs of unborn children and their families. NFGC commenced a pilot program from April to September of 2021 for Aboriginal families with concerns during pregnancy for the unborn child and mother. This work has national and international interest for the use of family-led decision making in the antenatal space, and in reducing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children entering state care at birth. The NFGC service has been funded until June 2022, and it is hoped that based on the success of the pilot, services for unborn children and their families will continue as well.



This year around the country

Tasmania

Locations



5

Clients



7,890

Staff



157



Relationships Australia Tasmania is dedicated to preventing suicide in Tasmanian communities and have two key programs to meet this need:

- > SPEAK UP! Stay ChatTY work to promote positive mental health factors and reduce stigma to encourage help seeking behaviour.
- > Suicide Prevention Team implements Community Action Plans to build capacity in communities to respond to suicide and promote positive mental health, and administers the Tasmanian Suicide Prevention Community Network (TSPCN).

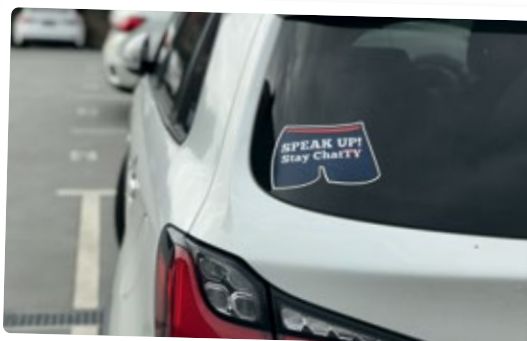
SPEAK UP! Stay ChatTY

SPEAK UP! Stay ChatTY works to promote positive mental health and prevent suicide by normalising conversations and encouraging people to seek help when they need it. Mitch McPherson established the organisation in 2013 after his younger brother died by suicide. Stay ChatTY has since partnered with Relationships Australia Tasmania and has become a household name, continuing to grow their reach across Tasmania in the space of positive mental health promotion.

The Stay ChatTY team continue to focus on presentation and workshop delivery across the state alongside donor, fundraising and event management and relationship building. Presentation and workshop delivery extends to schools (both Independent and Catholic as well as the Department of Education Schools grades 9-12), sporting clubs, community groups and workplaces state-wide.

In the past 12 months Stay ChatTY has had many notable milestones and accomplishments, including the following:

- > Distributed more than **10,000 Stay ChatTY bumper stickers**, which are now commonly seen on the road in Tasmania.



- > Delivered more than **150 presentations** to schools, sporting clubs, workplaces and community groups reaching over **5,000 people**.
- > Created and delivered the first annual community driven campaign – Shorts Day. Shorts Day reached more than **12,500 people** across Tasmania for 2021, from Queenstown to Bruny Island. There has been an abundance of positive feedback about the success of the day which demonstrates Tasmanians felt connected to a common goal where they could do something simple, with a big collective impact in breaking down the stigma that surrounds mental health and suicide.
- > The Stay ChatTY team has grown to 10 people as a result of continued success and additional funding support, working across the state alongside their Youth Reference Group of 12 members.



The Suicide Prevention Team

The Suicide Prevention team operates across four key areas to prevent suicide within Tasmania:

- > Community Action Plans (CAPs) for communities,
- > Suicide Prevention capacity building for Councils and Local Government Areas,
- > Administration of the Tasmanian Suicide Prevention Community Network (TSPCN), and
- > Organisation of the annual LiFE Awards and Suicide Prevention Forum.

Putting the community at the centre of what they do and utilising evidence-based actions to provide meaningful support, the team establishes community need and uses a strengths-based model to build community capacity. Actions can include: training, awareness, linkages to local supports, and policy and process development.

The team are currently working with 20+ community groups and have a plan to engage all 29 councils in Tasmania by December 2021. The Suicide Prevention Team also organise the Annual LiFE Awards and TSPCN Forum.

The awards recognise excellence in suicide prevention across four distinct categories and the TSPCN Forum brings together experts in suicide prevention, members of the community, and those who have been affected by suicide to learn more, discuss issues and contribute to solutions to help reduce suicide in Tasmania.

The team has noticed an increase in demand for the CAP program since COVID-19. This is reflected through recent engagement with a construction company in North West Tasmania. During the COVID-19 stand downs, the company recognised they needed to formalise their involvement with employee mental health, wellbeing, and the suicide prevention space. They developed a Mental Health & Suicide Prevention Community Action Plan (CAP) which included the following elements:

- > A commitment from directors, senior leaders and supervisors to make visible, long term commitments to mental health throughout their worksites,
- > Encouraging all employees to have a voice; identifying champions and supporters, providing training and resources to implement the plan and provide ongoing support,
- > Ensuring sufficient time and resources are allocated to implement the plan and provide ongoing commitment to the strategy.

The main focus for the team is developing sustainable action for long term community benefit.

This year around the country

Victoria

Locations



20

Clients



19,516

Staff



364



Men's Behaviour Change Program

The Men's Behaviour Change Program (MBCP) is designed to assist men to stop their use of violence and make changes towards developing safe and respectful relationships. This has been traditionally delivered through a 20-week face-to-face group program.

Our online program followed Family Safety Victoria's COVID-19 guidelines and was developed in collaboration with No To Violence, which offered monitors to observe and evaluate the program, as well as ensure accountability and best practice. The evaluation examined the outcomes focused on risk and safety management, efficacy and ability to engage the participants in the program.

The new model of remote delivery positioned us strongly to maintain engagement with men who use violence, and we offered a service to over 600 men, including more than 130 men in 16 online programs.

During periods of lockdown, maintaining a strong focus on assessing and managing the risk of men's use of violence in the home, particularly men living with their partners and children, was critical. Our family violence practitioners engaged men regularly through telephone contact, focusing on assessing the men's wellbeing and supporting them to maintain strategies to manage their behaviour.



600 MEN

offered MBCP service via

REMOTE DELIVERY



We became very familiar with the term 'pivoting' as periods of lockdown and physical distancing requirements called for new adaptations of the program. Relationships Australia Victoria met the challenge to deliver this essential service and the delivery of the online MBCP was highly successful. The aims and objectives of the MBCP were delivered with the fidelity and the integrity of the program intact, as well as safety for the women and children connected to the men.

The legacy of this adaptive process is our ability to transition quickly between face-to-face, socially distanced and online models. Through online services, we can keep men who use violence accountable and visible. We can provide service access to men in regional and remote areas, and those with other access challenges, enabling these men to gain the support they need to stop using violence in their families.



Traditional fire land based management talk at Inner Eastern Hub Day, Boroondara Council and Victoria Police

Men's Case Management Program

Through our Men's Case Management Program (MCMP), we offer a more intensive and tailored response to men who, in addition to their use of family violence, are experiencing issues such as mental health problems, alcohol or drug abuse or homelessness.

During the 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns, there were heightened concerns about men who use violence living in the home with their partners and children, or returning to the home even when police had removed the man through a safety notice or intervention order.

We were able to respond to this through offering support and alternative short-term accommodation to keep men who use violence out of the home and keep women and children safe.



This year around the country

Western Australia



Locations



24

Clients



22,639

Staff



341

Supporting families through tough times

The theme of supporting respectful relationships is strong across all of Relationships Australia WA's mental health programs, but especially in our everyday support of children, young people and families.

Challenges that emerged at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic has seen an increase in our work to help people stay connected not only to each other, but also to the support systems they need.

Relationships Australia WA's Family Mental Health Support Service (FMHSS), 4families, is a free service providing support to families and carers including evidence-informed therapeutic support, linking them to a variety of services to reduce family stress and enabling children and young people to reach their full potential. 4families adopts a child-centred approach and focuses on early intervention by addressing issues that affect the mental and emotional well-being of children and young people in their community.

Over the past year, more families and children have been more vulnerable and require additional psychological and emotional support, especially during lockdowns.

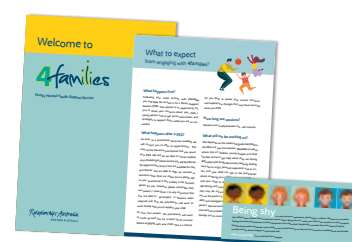
For these families, especially those who live in rural or remote locations, or who have members with health complications, phone calls with a 4families therapist could be their only outside contact.

In particular, we have witnessed an increase in anxiety among families, including:

- > parental anxiety about children being away from school or being at school,
- > children having increased anxiety about school, germs, hand washing, not seeing friends, and
- > families being worried about other family members who don't live with them.

To address the heightened sense of anxiety many families were experiencing, 4families practitioners developed a series of resources and tip sheets on topics including anxiety, school refusal, trauma and being a playful parent.

The *welcome information pack* is given to families to read and put into practice as they wait for ongoing consultations with the 4families service, and throughout their engagement with the program.



Not only are these resources an important support for individual clients and families, but they also widen the reach and provide early intervention as they are distributed to the community through events, community activities and school expos.

Having resources that can provide support and help for parents, children and families has been particularly important over the past year when services have been more difficult to access in person.

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