SUMMARY & SYNTHESIS REPORT

THIS DOCUMENT IS A SUMMARY OF FOUR REPORTS PROVIDED TO UNITING:

1. CONTEMPORARY EVIDENCE FOR BEST PRACTICE IN POST-SEPARATION COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION: A Rapid Review
2. WHAT DESCRIBES AND CHARACTERISES UNITING SERVICES? Analysis of Interviews with Uniting Staff
3. UNITING CLIENT EXPERIENCE AND OUTCOME: Statistical Analysis of Survey Results
4. UNITING’S POLICIES AND PRACTICE DOCUMENTS: Review of Uniting Documentation

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Special thanks to the staff and clients of Uniting counselling and mediation services for their contribution to the research.

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Uniting values a culture of evidence for, and from, practice and has a long tradition of supporting family wellbeing through their post-separation counselling and mediation services. Together with a team from the University of Newcastle, Uniting have undertaken an extended program of collaborative research exploring best practice in post-separation counselling and mediation.

WHAT DOES EXISTING EVIDENCE IDENTIFY AS BEST PRACTICE IN POST-SEPARATION COUNSELLING & MEDIATION SERVICES?

Rapid review of the available evidence identifies the following best practice principles for post-separation counselling and mediation services:

- Best practice is flexible, facilitative and fit for purpose
- Practitioners are critical for best practice outcomes
- Best practice requires appreciation of factors that frame client’s experiences and likely outcomes (i.e., is responsive to context and complexity)
- Best practice meets multiple and often conflicting aims & objectives of diverse populations of clients

HOW ARE THESE PRINCIPLES IMPLEMENTED WITHIN UNITING’S COUNSELLING & MEDIATION SERVICES?

- Staff receive quality supervision while working to good policies and practice guidelines
- The organisation and its staff have a clear focus on the wellbeing of children
- Specialist expertise in post-separation experience supports responsive child and family focused practice
- Innovative hybrid practice models support complex issues to be safely resolved

WHAT COULD IMPROVE ALIGNMENT BETWEEN BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES & UNITING’S WORK?

- Continued focus on monitoring and support of staff.
- Continued space for reflective practice especially around complex cases.
- Considered recruitment and retention strategies for quality staff.
- Adopting a diverse, inclusive and relationship driven focus for policy and practice guides.
- Emphasising safety and increasing collaboration

HOW UNITING ARE LEADING THE WAY

MODELLING
A focus on best practice and continual improvement

EMBRACING
An ethos of collaborative knowledge development for practice

DEMONSTRATING
The value of collaborative, holistic and flexible practice approaches flexible to fit context

VALUING
Reflective practice approaches that includes outcome measurement for quality assurance

EVIDENCE-INFORMED BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

Uniting achieves positive outcomes for their counselling and mediation services by providing services that are aligned with evidence-informed best practice principles.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES ARE MOST LIKELY WHEN:

- Practice is flexible, facilitative and fit for purpose
- Practitioners are highly skilled and well supported
- Individuals are effectively engaged and have positive working relationships with the practitioners
THIS DIAGRAM IDENTIFIES HOW BEST PRACTICE ADAPTS TO CONTEXT
Best practice occurs when skilled practitioners share a common understanding of their role & purpose & have access to practice models & approaches to respond to presenting issues of varying complexity.

HOW CAN COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION SERVICES MEASURE THE IMPACT/OUTFOMES OF THEIR SERVICES?
Uniting are undertaking extensive collaborative work with staff to build a shared understanding of the intended outcomes of the services delivered and how these are best operationalised and measured. Fostering a culture of outcomes focused practice holds considerable promise, especially if this extends to and includes the voice of clients. Key considerations for effective outcome measurement include factors relevant to the client, practitioner and the organisation.

This work can maximise the value of outcomes measurement for Uniting by informing continuous quality improvement and demonstrating value of service innovations for sector leadership.

ARE OUTCOMES FOR PARTICULAR CLIENTS SIGNIFICANTLY BETTER & IF SO WHY? With due caution given to small sample size, results from survey of past clients suggests differences in self-reported outcomes:

Men were less satisfied and reported poorer outcomes than women. Factors contributing to this could include: a perception by men that the family law system favours women, the gender balance of staff working with these men, and the expectations men may hold about possible and probable outcomes of their service engagement.

There is scope for Uniting to engage more families from diverse backgrounds (including cultural, sexuality and people with disabilities). Challenges include the Western nature of many practice models, creating accessible services and increasing the diversity of the workforce.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE OUTCOME MEASUREMENT
FOR CLIENTS
Tools are needed that consider gender, sexuality, culture, ability & context that measure access, participation & success

FOR STAFF
Staff to identify challenges in what, how & when to measure outcomes

FOR THE ORGANISATION
Outcome measures ideally referenced to baseline context and client goals which may not fit organisational remit

AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION
ALIGNMENT
Opportunities exist to engage with diverse family groups and men, which will require thinking about the fit for purpose of existing models of practice. Not all services are available in all areas (due to funding) which may limit capacity to adequately meet place-based need.

RESOURCES
Targeting services to engage marginalised families will require more time, expertise and resources.

HOW DO UNITING’S COUNSELLING & MEDIATION SERVICES ACHIEVE POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR THEIR CLIENTS?

1. Highly skilled practitioners
2. A common focus on child wellbeing
3. Strong support & supervision for staff
4. Flexible approaches & models of practice
5. An ethos of collaboration & collaborative cross-disciplinary work
6. A history of availability of high-quality training
7. A history of strong clinical leadership with a focus on clinical needs in decision making

7 KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL CLIENT OUTCOMES
INTRODUCTION

BEST PRACTICE AND TRENDS IN COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION SERVICES IN NSW

A COLLABORATIVE CASE STUDY OF UNITING: SUMMARY AND SYNTHESIS REPORT

UNITING VALUES A CULTURE OF EVIDENCE

FOR, AND FROM, PRACTICE

Act 2006, and changes to the family relationship services system through the Family Support Program. At their core, these reforms and policy developments aimed to address the needs of parents and their children more effectively and with more sensitivity. With dual aims of decreasing adversarial conflict and increasing preventative support for families, parents involved in post-separation disputes have, since July 2008, been required to attempt family dispute resolution (FDR) before proceeding to court. Both intact and separating families are able to access a suite of information, referral, advice and support services.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

The aims of the research included exploring the evidence base for best practice in providing post-separation counselling and mediation services, the fit between the existing evidence base and Uniting’s current practice, drivers and contexts of implementation and practice, and indicators of effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery. Using Uniting’s counselling and mediation services as a case study, a four-part research project explored three broad research questions and a number of sub-questions as outlined on the following page.

A CULTURE OF EVIDENCE

Uniting values a culture of evidence for, and from, practice and has a long tradition of supporting families to enhance their wellbeing and participation in the community including, importantly, through their post-separation counselling and mediation services. Post-separation services play an important role in increasing parents’ focus on, and understanding of, their children’s needs after family breakdown (Brown, 2008). Further, they can support the development of more workable parenting agreements and increased or strengthened skills for future conflict resolution (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, & Braver, 2004).

COLLABORATIVE PARTNERS

Uniting partnered with a team of researchers at the University of Newcastle to undertake an extended program of collaborative research to inform continuous improvement of post-separation services and to identify areas of innovation and implications for practice. The program of research—Best Practice and Trends in Counselling and Mediation Programs in NSW: A Collaborative Case Study of Uniting—was set in the context of the 2006 reforms to the Family Law system, including changes to the Family Law Act 1975 through the Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility)
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

ONE
WHAT DOES THE EXISTING EVIDENCE BASE IDENTIFY AS PRINCIPLES FOR BEST PRACTICE IN TERMS OF POST-SEPARATION COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION SERVICES?

a. How are these principles for best practice implemented within Uniting’s counselling and mediation services?
b. How can current practice in Uniting’s counselling and mediation services inform best practice and its implementation across the sector?
c. What changes could be made to improve the alignment between best practice principles and service delivery?

TWO
HOW DO UNITING’S COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION SERVICES ACHIEVE POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR THEIR CLIENTS?

a. What are the main contributors to this performance?
b. Are outcomes significantly better for particular clients, and if so, why?
c. Are Uniting’s counselling and mediation services aligned to need?
d. Are Uniting’s counselling and mediation services operating cost-effectively?

THREE
HOW CAN COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION SERVICES MEASURE THE IMPACT/OUTCOMES OF THEIR SERVICES?

a. What are the challenges and enablers (including structural, systemic and practice) in the measurement of effect/outcomes for clients of counselling and mediation services?
b. What changes could be made to improve the measurement of impact/outcomes by Uniting’s counselling and mediation services?
# Four Phases of the Research

The table below indicates the research question investigated, an overview of the research tasks and methods used along with the collaborative processes that engaged Uniting staff in the research and encouraged staff reflection on implications for practice.

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**This Report Provides a Summary and Synthesis of the Findings from the Research Undertaken**

The following sections of the report briefly summarise key findings from a rapid review of literature (Part A), interviews with Uniting staff (Part B), and an online survey of Uniting clients and a review of Uniting’s policy and practice documents (Part C). (More detailed reports are available for each of the components of the research.) A synthesis of key findings across phases A, B and C is presented, with the final sections of the report discussing outcome measurement and summarising the findings against the research questions for the project.

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1 From here on, “Uniting” refers to Uniting counselling and mediation services rather than Uniting as a whole, unless indicated otherwise.
SUPPORTING FAMILY WELLBEING THROUGH THEIR POST-SEPARATION COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION SERVICES
PART A: EVIDENCE FOR BEST PRACTICE
WHAT CONSTITUTES BEST PRACTICE?

The first phase of the research project explored the research question: “What constitutes best practice in post-separation counselling and mediation?”

Best practice was understood as the interplay between “evidence for practice” and “evidence from practice”

Rapid Review
A rapid review method (similar to Khangura et al., 2012) was used to produce a succinct, but in-depth, discussion of evidence. Rapid reviews are an accelerated way of synthesising evidence from existing literature and is particularly suited to policy and practice contexts (Featherstone et al., 2015). The strategy for the literature search focused on peer-reviewed studies, grey literature and relevant government reports that identified best practices and quality outcomes in counselling and mediation in a post-separation space, but not the factors that influence the experiences and outcomes of families’ post-separation (a linked but separate phenomenon). The review focused primarily on sources from Australia and New Zealand spanning the period 2000–2018 (with seminal works and key international comparisons included where appropriate). In total, the review identified more than 300 sources of information, with 275 examined for relevant themes. The majority (n = 196) of the 275 articles reviewed were peer-reviewed articles, with the remainder mainly being reports (especially to government agencies), books, book chapters, conference presentations and one PhD thesis. Of these, 112 discussed the practice of mediation or FDR, and 62 discussed post-separation counselling and support.

The conceptual framework shown below was developed to represent and organise the findings of the rapid review. It identifies that an important, overarching and consistent theme of the literature reviewed was that client context matters to post-separation counselling and mediation. Responsive to client context were the key themes of practitioner role and purpose, complexity of presenting client issues and need, and practice approach and intervention. These key themes are suggested to be interconnected and to collectively inform best practice outcomes, especially when practice is flexible and adaptive to client context.

![Conceptual Framework](attachment:conceptual_framework.png)
FINDINGS

Full details of the findings from the rapid review are presented in a separate report: “Contemporary Evidence for Best Practice in Post-Separation Counselling and Mediation: A Rapid Review”. The key findings are summarised below.

PRACTITIONERS ARE CRITICAL TO BEST PRACTICE

27 articles reviewed described factors relating to practitioners— their role and purpose in the practice of counselling and mediation services.

How both counsellors and mediators understand the objectives and intended outcomes of their work is identified in the literature as a key, but contested, issue that can influence the form and function of their work.

BEST PRACTICE IS RESPONSIVE TO CONTEXT AND COMPLEXITY

Circumstances of clients and the issues they bring to post separation counselling and mediation vary from low to high levels of complexity.

133 sources reviewed were in-depth descriptions of context, and the complexities and challenges faced by mediators and counsellors in the post-separation space. Literature reviewed included 62 sources with a specific focus on violence and a further 71 related to inclusive practice.

The safety of those engaged in post-separation services and supports was identified as critically important. It was emphasised that when, whether and how appropriate risk-mitigation strategies and suitable models of care are implemented is influenced by how practitioners construct, understand, assess and screen for conflict, violence and safety.

A key consideration and challenge identified in the literature is the need for practice to meet multiple and often conflicting aims and objectives of diverse populations of clients. Best practice is sensitive to contextual complexities experienced by diverse populations and is holistic, respectful and responsive to these.

BEST PRACTICE APPROACHES AND MODELS OF INTERVENTION

A total of 115 sources described models, approaches, perspectives, frameworks or skills for practice in the post-separation space.

The existing literature regarding specific models or approaches to post-separation counselling and mediation is highly descriptive. Few models and approaches have reported rigorous evaluation data (with the exception of some approaches to mediation, particularly in the context of family violence, and the adaptation of existing psychoeducation programs to the post-separation space).

Promising practices promote the adoption or strengthening of particular skills (e.g., motivational interviewing) or more joined-up, collaborative or coordinated approaches.
Together with a team from the University of Newcastle, Uniting have undertaken an extended program of collaborative research exploring best practice in post-separation counselling and mediation.
PART B: ACHIEVING POSITIVE OUTCOMES
PHASE 2 OF THE RESEARCH

The second phase of the research explored best practice within Uniting by asking: “How do Uniting’s counselling and mediation services achieve positive outcomes for their clients?”

QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS EXPLORED A RANGE OF OPINIONS AND EXPERIENCES PRESENTED BY PARTICIPANTS

The data analysis identified a number of findings that were consistent with those emerging from the rapid review, including the relevance and usefulness of the developed conceptual framework as a way of organising identified key themes.

As such, in this report and in a separate report that provides more details of the staff interviews ("What Describes and Characterises Uniting Services? Analysis of Interviews with Uniting Staff"), the findings are organised and presented consistent with the conceptual framework shown on page 9.

INTERVIEWS WITH STAFF

Thirty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted with Uniting staff, including practitioners, supervisors and managers. At least three staff were interviewed at each of the eight Uniting counselling and mediation services offices (Campbelltown, Central Sydney, Fairfield, Gosford, Newcastle, Parramatta, Penrith and Wollongong/Nowra). The interviews examined how Uniting’s counselling and mediation services achieve positive outcomes for their clients.

During audio-recorded interviews lasting between 41 and 91 minutes, the participants (28 female and 8 male staff members, most of whom were quite experienced) discussed the following topics and were encouraged to focus on those most relevant or of interest to them:

1. Their experience and what their work looks like
2. What they hope to achieve in their role
3. Theories or models of practice that underpin their work
4. Strengths and limitations of Uniting’s approach to counselling and mediation
5. Challenges involved in their work
6. Impacts of their work and how these can be measured
7. Whether outcomes differ for different groups (e.g., Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families or families from culturally and linguistically diverse [CALD] backgrounds) and how their engagement could be improved.

Qualitative data analysis explored the range of opinions and experiences presented by participants and identified key themes. An important part of the process was ensuring the analysis and themes were consistent with the understanding of Uniting staff. This was done by obtaining feedback from the research reference group on an initial report, a presentation at a conference of all Uniting counselling and mediation services staff, three workshops with a total of 32 staff (13 of whom had not previously been interviewed) and presenting with Elke Pitkethley (from Uniting) at the 2019 Family and Relationship Services Australia National Conference (also attended by a number of other Uniting staff).
PART B : ACHIEVING POSITIVE OUTCOMES

FINDINGS

The following information presents a summary of findings. (Supporting quotes are included in the more detailed report).

FINDINGS RELATE TO:

- CONTEXTS OF PRACTICE: increasing complexity, organisational ethos and change processes
- PRACTITIONER ROLE AND PURPOSE: focus of work, foundational frameworks or theory for practice, and the role of supervision in ensuring best practice
- COMPLEXITY OF PRESENTING ISSUES: domestic violence, engagement of families from diverse backgrounds and resource imposts of best practice in complex contexts
- PRACTICE APPROACH AND MODEL: flexibility, mediation as intervention, work with mandated clients and specialist post-separation expertise (including considerations of confidentiality, subpoenas and work with independent children’s lawyers).

UNITING ACHIEVES POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR THEIR COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION SERVICES BY PROVIDING SERVICES THAT ARE ALIGNED WITH EVIDENCE-INFORMED BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES
Some participants suggested their work was becoming more complex. Key areas of complexity included domestic violence and engaging families from diverse backgrounds, and participants spoke about the need for adequate funding and resources to respond appropriately.

Participants reported confidence in providing services in the context of domestic violence, but noted it was critical that there were nuanced and sensitive assessments of safety (including attention to dynamics of coercive control as well as physical safety) and that effective processes were resource-intensive (in terms of time, staff and skills) but had demonstrable benefits and positive outcomes.

The complexity of engaging with families from diverse backgrounds seemed to exist at multiple, and perhaps intersecting, aspects of practice. Factors identified as contributing to the challenge of working with complexity included the fit between cultural norms and practice models, language and communication needs, and clients’ experiences of structural and systemic disadvantage and distrust.

Providing post-separation mediation and counselling meant working in contexts characterised as challenging and complex. These contexts, which some staff believed were becoming more complex, influenced how practitioners approached their work, and the impact of their work.

Participants described Uniting’s organisational ethos, policies and practice guidelines as protective factors for clients and practitioners alike. Participants also emphasised the importance of quality professional supervision for best practice outcomes.

Participants believed there was a strong foundation for their practice (including strong teams; excellent supervision; good practice, policies and guidelines; and Uniting counselling and mediation services’ reputation). Related to these were concerns about the potential impact of a recent organisational change process.

Participants described a focus on the wellbeing of children and clarity around their role and purpose. A range of frameworks, theories and foundations for practice informed their work, with family systems theory being the most common (particularly for counsellors).

Factors central to Uniting’s practice approach and model included: fit and flexibility, an ethos of mediation as intervention for child-focused outcomes, work with mandated clients, and specialist post-separation expertise.

Flexibility was critical to responding to complexity, including decisions about which program or model would work best for clients and the number of sessions required. Uniting’s focus on the wellbeing of the child meant that mediators believed it was important for best practice that, at times, they acted as advocates for the wellbeing of children.

The post-separation and family law context of services was suggested to be a defining area of specialist expertise for the service.

Participants reported a range of challenges—including the expectations of, and from, clients engaging with services—in the complexity of their work.
PART C: UNDERSTANDING OUTCOMES
THE THIRD PHASE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Phase 3 (Part C) of the project explored the research questions: “How can Uniting and other services measure the impact of their counselling and mediation services?” and “What does data collected tell us about the effectiveness and efficiency of Uniting services?”

THE SURVEY ASKED CLIENTS OF UNITING ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE, OUTCOMES AND SATISFACTION WITH THE SERVICE THEY RECEIVED.

CLIENT SURVEY

An online survey was developed by the research team with input from the research reference group from Uniting.

The survey asked past clients of Uniting’s mediation and counselling services about their experience, outcomes and satisfaction with the service they received. Past clients of Uniting, who had previously identified their willingness to receive follow-up contact, were invited by email to complete the survey.

The survey gathered data to explore perceived change and improvement across knowledge, skills, behaviour, confidence, connection and coping, as well as satisfaction with services received. Key concepts explored included satisfaction and a sense of achieved outcome.

Outcomes explored were aligned with the Department of Social Services’ SCORE matrix content. Sensitive to Uniting’s context within the family law system, legal outcomes (regarding family law agreements reached and avoidance of family law court) were also explored. Outcomes assessed included perceived changes in relation to their child, their parenting, their own coping with family breakdown and their interactions with the other parent.

Survey items were measured using categorical response and five-point Likert scales (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis included frequency counts, cross-tabulations, correlation analyses, independent samples t-tests, exploratory factor analysis and internal reliability analyses.
The following section provides a summary of the findings across reported legal, knowledge, skills and behaviours, coping and confidence, and satisfaction and connection outcomes. As discussed later in this report (and in more detail in the full report—“Uniting Client Experience and Outcome: Statistical Analysis of Survey Results”), the data analysis assisted in developing recommendations for future outcome measurement efforts.

RESPONSE RATE
There was a relatively low response rate (10%), with 71 surveys being completed. Roughly two-thirds (65%) of the respondents were female and one-third (35%) were male. The majority identified as non-Indigenous (99%), of an Anglo Australian cultural background (79%) and aged 35–49 years (63%).

At the time of their engagement with Uniting, around half (51%) were newly separated and 39% had transitioned into their single-parent role post separation. Most had either one (42%) or two (37%) children, and more than 60% reported having care either all of the time (35%) or at least half of the time (27%).

This composition of care may reflect the gender disparity within the sample, the separation status of families (e.g., parenting agreements may not have been finalised for newly separated families) and the age of the children at the time of service engagement and separation.

ABOUT THE SAMPLE
Almost half (48%) of the sample attended Uniting services at either Parramatta (31%) or the Central Sydney office (17%). The majority of respondents (73%) used one service type, and the remaining 27% used two or more Uniting services. The most common service type used was mediation (70%), followed by Keeping Contact (28%). Consistent with the types of service most commonly used by respondents, the majority reported attending services 1–3 times. This was particularly evident for those attending mediation and/or child inclusive mediation, where 84% (n = 42) and 88% (n = 7) respectively reported attending 1–3 times. In contrast, 44% of respondents (n = 3) who reported using the Anchor program identified having attended 10 or more sessions. Around one-third of respondents (34%) reported being court-ordered to attend services.
LEGAL OUTCOMES
The vast majority (92%) of respondents reported that parenting agreements were relevant to them; however, the majority of respondents (73%) said a parenting agreement was not achieved as a result of their engagement with Uniting services. Similarly, of the 72% (n = 51) of respondents who reported court processes as being relevant to their service engagement, the majority (78%) stated that they did not avoid going to court as a result of this engagement.

KNOWLEDGE OUTCOMES
Knowledge outcomes related to knowledge about the respondent themselves (self-awareness), the needs and perspectives of their children and the other parent (perspective-taking), and factors relevant to family breakdown (conflict management and the family law system).
Items related to self-awareness tended to have greater agreement than items requiring perspective-taking (particularly in regard to the other parent). Positive correlations were observed between all service outcomes related to knowledge, meaning that as knowledge in one domain increased, so did knowledge in another.

SKILLS AND BEHAVIOURS OUTCOMES
Skills and behaviours relating to parenting, conflict resolution, communication, coping, stress management and decision-making were assessed. While 61% of respondents reported that they had developed one or more skills, only 28% reported gaining or strengthening any one of these identified skills (and behaviours). This may be because the majority of respondents reported primarily having used mediation services.
Gender effects were observed among correlations for skills- and behaviour-based outcomes. For female respondents, there were moderate positive correlations between all skill increases, meaning that if the respondent reported an increase in one skill, they were likely to report an increase in another skill. For men, there was only one positive moderate correlation (r = .405, p = < .05) present, whereby the greater the increase in decision-making skills, the greater the increase in conflict resolution skills, and vice versa.

CONFIDENCE AND COPING OUTCOMES
Outcomes relating to improved coping and confidence were assessed for the respondent, their parenting and co-parenting interactions post-family breakdown, and their interactions with the family law system. There tended to be greater agreement with items related to their own coping and confidence compared to items related to co-parenting interactions and interactions with the family law system (which may be connected). Mixed results were observed in relation to reporting on coping and confidence in parenting. There was a trend towards reported increases in child focus, but less so in regard to safety, assisting the child to cope and the child understanding what is happening.

SATISFACTION (AND CONNECTION) OUTCOMES
Satisfaction and connection outcomes were assessed in the client survey as related indicators of client engagement, service efficacy and likely relational rapport between the service provider and the respondent. Items that related personally to the respondent and their own feelings of being heard, hearing their child and being satisfied with services provided were more likely to be agreed with than questions related to hearing the needs of the other parent and, perhaps relatedly, satisfaction with parenting agreements reached and feeling that things are better for them.
DOCUMENT REVIEW

Uniting’s counselling and mediation policy and practice documents were reviewed for their overall alignment with, and coverage of, the funding body’s requirements as expressed in the Families and Children Activity Administrative Approval Requirements (FaC Requirements).

In addition, the documents were examined for the ways in which they might contribute to Uniting addressing some of the challenges identified through this research.

Forty-eight documents were reviewed, starting with an assessment against the elements of the FaC Requirements and then consideration in relation to known broader issues (e.g., alignment with child protection requirements) and relevant aspects raised in the rapid review and the staff interviews.

THE REVIEW FOUND THAT:

The Uniting Policy Framework provides a well-structured policy-making model that ensures consistency and reliable coverage of important policy elements.

The documents reviewed were consistently aligned with this model.

The FaC Requirements are covered thoroughly, although there is a gap in the area of demonstrating internal and external stakeholder engagement where these are required.

The documents are primarily clear, direct, easy to follow and written in plain English. They are highly accessible for a particular band of literate professionals.

The documents could better reflect the diversity of practitioners and client populations that Uniting is seeking to engage.

The documents also demonstrate their appreciation of the changing and diverse contexts of practice, which practitioners articulated was a challenge of their work.

Practice documents may be shaped by an emphasis on risk management, leading to a tendency to have a transactional tone, rather than attention to relationship-building or care for the other person.

In addition to the existing function of the documents, there is an opportunity for further work including:

- facilitating relationship-building in practice
- articulating how the procedures and policies align with Uniting’s values, ethics and principles
- attending to the complexities of context
- leading the way in extending Uniting’s engagement with diversity.

SEVEN GENERAL SUGGESTIONS FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AROSE FROM THIS DOCUMENT REVIEW:

1. Ensure that each Document Development Reference Group enables membership from participants reflecting a diverse range of perspectives.
2. Include details of the people or positions that were in the Document Development Reference Group for each policy document.
3. Consider (and experiment with) whether diversifying the voices in/of the documents might be one step in the process of facilitating engagement with more diverse communities.
4. Consider including an opening statement for each document demonstrating the alignment between the policy or procedure documents and Uniting’s values and principles.
5. Add a statement about context to each policy document to complement the existing statement about purpose and the proposed statement about alignment with values and principles. Context may include differences of geography as well as the changing social context of practice or the different issues that people who access services are facing.
6. Explore the possibility of practice notes (which assist practitioners to translate policies and procedure into practice) on a range of topics that particularly address the complexities of practice.
7. Create some clearer statements about Uniting’s commitment to being a learning organisation and identify different mechanisms within procedure documents for information gathered to inform individual practice development, enabling supervision relationships and organisational learning.
ADDRESSING CHALLENGES
SYNTHESIS OF COMMON AND KEY FINDINGS

THESE FINDINGS CAN HELP WITH THE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT OF UNITING SERVICES.
WHAT EMERGED

When considered collectively, common and key findings emerged from the rapid review (Part A), staff interviews (Part B) and the client survey and document review (Part C).

The following figure provides an illustrative overview of common and key findings across the reports. The findings are organised into the subsections of the developed conceptual framework for the research. The following sections of the report discuss these in more detail.

COMMON RESEARCH FINDINGS

KEY FINDING

CONTEXTS OF PRACTICE

Increasingly complex

PRACTITIONER ROLE & PURPOSE
Common focus on the best interests of the child
Organisational ethos, policies and practices

COMPLEXITY OF PRESENTING ISSUES
Domestic violence
Engaging families from diverse backgrounds
Considerations of gender
Resources and funding

PRACTICE APPROACH & MODEL
Flexibility and fit
Mediation as intervention
Authentic engagement
Specialist service provision
Different models
The rapid review found that there was a context-heavy gaze across the extensive, but fragmented, evidence base reviewed. One hundred and thirty-three sources reviewed were in-depth descriptions of context—that is, the issues, considerations and characteristic challenges faced by mediators and counsellors in the post-separation space. Staff who were interviewed described the contexts of their work as complex and challenging. They explained that these complexities influence their approach to work, and they described the impact their work has on them.

Findings from the interviews with Uniting staff indicated a fairly widely held belief among the practitioners that their work is becoming more complex. Consistent with the results of the rapid review, staff suggested that key areas of complexity include domestic violence and engaging families from diverse backgrounds, and that there is a need for adequate funding and resources to respond appropriately to complex cases. Complexity in the context of practice is influenced by systemic and structural factors as well as individual, cultural and relational factors, each of which require consideration and can pose challenges for practice.

Staff who were interviewed expressed an overall sense of confidence in their capacity to respond to complexity in their work. They identified strategies that echo the promising practice profiled in the rapid review, including strategies for recruitment, retention and training of an inclusive workforce, as well as collaborative and sensitive approaches to work that emphasise safety and connection. Interview participants felt that major limitations in working with more complex cases are funding and available resources: they felt they could do more if they had more resources. Participants noted that (increasingly) complex client needs may often be better met by services that are more time- and resource-intensive:

“If we’re going to provide best practice, then we really need to have the resources available, and best practice for me does include either someone talking about developmental needs, someone who can see the kids and feed back information to the parents, because that’s the way in. (36M)"

Findings from the rapid review and staff interviews highlighted that best practice in post-separation counselling and mediation is responsive to context and complexity and requires a nuanced appreciation of factors that frame both clients’ experiences and likely outcomes. Further, the data highlighted that a nuanced and sensitive understanding of context is an understated, and potentially unrecognised, driver of good practice.

2 The participants were identified by a random number followed by a code showing their current role: A = Anchor counsellors, C = counsellors (non-Anchor), M = mediators and O = other.
A COMMON FOCUS

From the rapid review, Goodhardt et al. (2005, p. 319), suggested “purpose drives practice”; that is, the why of work leads to clarity about the what, how and, ultimately, with what outcome.

In the staff interviews, when asked what they hoped to achieve in their work, there was a clear focus on the wellbeing of children.

This common focus and sense of purpose was observed across interviews with adult counsellors, child counsellors and mediators. Across practice contexts, staff who were interviewed were clear about the impact that separation can have on children.

They believed that a major part of their role is to help children and parents navigate the changes in ways that minimise distress and negative effects for children, regardless of whether they are working directly with children.

The rapid review found that the best way for counselling and mediation practice to support the wellbeing of children and meet their needs was keenly debated. Across the evidence reviewed, it was agreed that in order to protect the best interests of children post-separation, it is vital that their voices are heard and their experiences acknowledged.

The voices and experiences of children have often been absent or effectively silenced in post-separation processes, at least historically (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, 2003). When interviewed, participating Uniting staff discussed the primacy of the best interests of children in models of child inclusive practice (discussed later in this report) and, consistent with their reported grounding in family systems theory, in work with parents.

Staff emphasised that parents need to change their behaviour in order to improve their children’s wellbeing, and this is one of the main outcomes they hope to achieve, even if it is not always possible.

In addition to a focus on the child, staff (particularly adult counsellors) identified a number of other goals they want to achieve in their work, including improving the wellbeing of clients, decreasing the level of conflict, helping clients gain new insights and ensuring that Uniting delivers high-quality services.
THE ORGANISATIONAL ETHOS, CULTURE, CONDUCT, POLICY AND PRACTICE AT UNITING WAS SUGGESTED BY THE STAFF WHO WERE INTERVIEWED TO BE PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR BOTH CLIENTS AND PRACTITIONERS.

Participants described working for a strong organisation, were positive about their work and noted that Uniting is grounded in good practice and has good policy, guidelines and tools:

“I just wanted to probably say that I felt that the policies and the practices for counselling and mediation were really good. I think we’ve got a really good structure.” (02M)

Staff were positive about their managers and supervisors, commenting about characteristics such as openness, flexibility, support, availability and experience. They felt they worked in a supportive environment, with both informal support from their colleagues (e.g., checking in with each other during breaks, being available for advice or as a sounding board) and more

THE AVAILABILITY, FREQUENCY AND FLEXIBILITY OF SUPERVISION WAS SEEN AS IMPORTANT IN ENSURING HIGH QUALITY PRACTICE

formal support from their managers and the organisation (e.g., supervision and an Employment Assistance Scheme). The availability, frequency and flexibility of supervision were seen as an important in ensuring high quality practice by staff. Supervision was clearly built into the day-to-day practice of staff and was recognised as being essential for good practice by the practitioners. Not only did staff say that it is important, but supervision was frequently referred to in terms of how staff respond to the challenges of their work.

The interviews were conducted after a period of major organisational change, and some staff were concerned about the potential impact of some of these changes on best practice. In particular, there were concerns about the impact of closing the Institute of Family Practice on the induction of new staff and ongoing training, and a perceived increasing focus (in both Uniting overall and the sector more broadly) on business decisions rather than a focus on the best interests of clients.

These findings echo the sentiments of Australian research by Lundberg and Moloney (2010), who noted that both personal and organisational resources are important in mitigating the imposts of post-separation practice on workers (including negative emotional impacts, work-related stress and burnout) and ensuring positive outcomes for practitioners and clients alike. The authors identified that practitioners’ capacity for effective use of self in their work, critical reflection and self-awareness are essential to good practice outcomes and practitioners’ self-care and wellbeing (Lundberg & Moloney, 2010). The authors also noted that participants in their study considered “the supportive and understanding culture of the organisation to be ‘extremely’ important in enabling them to cope with the demands of high conflict FDR” (Lundberg & Moloney, 2010, p. 218).
How Uniting Are Leading The Way

The review contained several suggestions, including considering how the documents can help to:

- facilitate relationship-building in practice
- articulate how the procedures and policies align with Uniting’s values, ethics and principles
- attend to the complexities of context
- lead the way in extending Uniting’s engagement with diversity (see above).

Staff were positive about their managers commenting about their openness, flexibility, support & availability.
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence was noted by the Uniting staff who were interviewed to be one of the key complexities that increasingly characterises the context of their work. Dobinson and Gray (2016) identified that family violence is defined in legislation as violent, threatening or any other behaviour that coerces or controls a member of the perpetrator’s family or causes them to be fearful, with a non-exhaustive list of typical behaviours including physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and financial abuse.

While contexts of domestic violence were acknowledged to clearly add layers of complexity to the practice and process of counselling and mediation, Uniting practitioners who were interviewed were mostly positive about their ability to respond appropriately to domestic violence and to make a difference, and they believed it was important that they did so:

"Yes, to answer your question before, which was, “Can we work with DV?” Absolutely, and I think we get some fantastic outcomes, as opposed to someone who has been a victim of domestic violence and goes to court and gets to be cross-examined by their partner and made to feel that way again. We can provide them with a process where they are empowered to make choices and be supported to say “No”, and be supported to be able to respond for themselves. (27M)"

Across the reviewed evidence base for best practice in post-separation counselling and mediation, key considerations and challenges for practice in the context of domestic violence include issues that are fundamentally related to safety. Across the literature, there was unilateral support for the primacy of safety for those engaged with post-separation services and supports, but also a sense that when, whether and how appropriate risk-mitigation strategies and suitable models of care are implemented will be influenced by how practitioners construct, understand, assess and screen for conflict, violence and safety. These considerations have serious implications for practitioners’ ability to ensure client safety and the workability of legal outcomes reached.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR BEST PRACTICE IN POST-SEPARATION COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION

SYNTHESIS OF COMMON & KEY FINDINGS

COMPLEXITY OF PRESENTING ISSUES
Consistent with this, interviews with Uniting staff identified that in thinking about suitability for mediation in cases where there has been domestic or family violence, staff (particularly managers) emphasised the importance of assessing whether mediation is safe for survivors, and not proceeding to mediation in severe cases or where there is a risk to the perpetrator’s partner:

*I guess when you’re talking about mediation, it’s about assessing the ability of each party to engage in that mediation process freely, without being intimidated, and to work towards making agreements free of pressure or coercion from the other party.* (01C)

Given the fluid, volatile and reactive nature of family violence, practitioners in the post-separation space are required to sit with, assess, screen and plan around risk in a way that is responsive and attuned to vulnerability. Across the existing evidence for best practice, there is considerable discussion about how practitioners practically do this, as well as the complexity of issues associated with screening and assessing risk.

Appropriate screening and detection of violence (including coercive control) requires an understanding of what forms of violence render a case inappropriate for mediation (in particular) and what processes need to be implemented to ensure the case can be safely and effectively dealt with in mediation (Cleak & Bickerdike, 2016).

If screening for family violence does not occur in a safe, private space, it is likely that powerful disincentives to disclose violence—especially in the presence of the perpetrator—will intimidate the victim and they will remain silent (Ballard et al., 2011). Even when screening does occur, detection rates vary. For instance, Ballard et al. (2011) found that, despite pre-mediation preparation, mediators did not report the presence of intimate partner violence in more than half the cases in which the parties themselves reported violence.

Over the past three decades, the conceptual constructions of family violence have grown increasingly complex and nuanced. As Kaspiew (2008, p. 280) noted:

*A common thread through these approaches is that not all violence is the same, and that it occurs upon a continuum of severity ranging from situation-based ‘conflict’ to an extreme form of coercive control marked by severe violence and the exertion of control through mechanisms such as emotional and verbal abuse, social isolation and restriction of access to financial resources.*

Uniting staff who were interviewed identified that assessing client safety in their practice involves more than ensuring that the parties are physically safe; it also means ensuring that they will not be intimidated or exposed to coercive, controlling behaviour:
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CONT...

How practice responds to this remains unclear, with another study finding that although approximately 60% of divorcing couples who attended mediation reported physical violence on a screening measure, only 7% of these couples were screened out of mediation (Beck et al., 2011).

Demonstrating responsivity to these issues, Uniting is undertaking a trial of the universal DOORS (Detection of Overall Risk Screen; McIntosh & Ralfs, 2012) screening tool to supplement existing safety screening processes. Reviewing the existing evidence base for post-separation practice identified some advantages of the DOORS approach and some caution regarding its workability in everyday practice. Some victims of domestic violence who were involved in evaluating the tool supported the repeated questions about violence, but others suggested that screening tools that are too long and/or repetitive can be experienced as intimidating (Cleak & Bickerdike, 2016).

Apart from a consensus on prioritising safety and the need for screening and assessment of risk evidence for best practice in contexts of family violence, literature also suggests the need for a collaborative approach to service and support (e.g., Croucher, 2014; Field & Lynch, 2014; Kaspiew et al., 2014; Moloney, Qu, Weston, & Hand, 2013). Uniting staff who were interviewed identified that working successfully with domestic violence often requires more nuanced, sensitive and resource-intensive programs. Staff who had been involved with the Coordinated Family Dispute Resolution (CFDR) (discussed in later sections of this report) were very positive about CFDR as an example of how Uniting can successfully work with domestic violence. The program involved a specialist risk assessment at the start, ongoing safety assessments throughout the process, safety planning and domestic violence support, independent legal advice, and mediation. It was an expensive and resource-intensive program, but it produced demonstrable results:

*Highly successful, highly resourced, and also highly expensive in terms of the way that the government sees what we do (but not) in comparison to what it would cost to send them through the family court. (27M)*
In health, welfare, education and counselling literature, engagement is commonly described as positive relationships that develop between service users and providers that support the achievement of service users’ aims and expectations (Addington et al., 2006; Brady & Scully, 2005; Coatsworth et al., 2001; Dearing et al., 2005). Engagement has often been operationalised and measured in practice settings as a static concept, such as a count of attendance or participation (e.g., Coatsworth et al., 2001; Connors et al., 1997), or a dynamic concept, such as the nature and quality of the relationship between the worker and the client (e.g., Fletcher & Visser, 2008).

Findings from the rapid review identified that meeting the multiple and often conflicting aims and objectives of diverse populations of clients is a key consideration and challenge for practice. They stressed that one-size-fits-all approaches are particularly ineffective in reaching disadvantaged and vulnerable populations.

Across the literature reviewed, best practice was identified as that which is aware, responsive and inclusive, with particular attention given to the contextual complexities of working with fathers, children and culturally diverse clients.

Culturally inclusive and competent service delivery refers to systemic, organisational and professional behaviours, attitudes and policies that enable effective and appropriate service delivery to individuals from non-dominant cultural groups (Cross et al., 1989).

Practice that is culturally inclusive builds on and subsumes cultural awareness (knowledge of cultural norms) and cultural sensitivity (recognition of diversity within cultural groups) and requires practitioners to develop an appreciation and understanding of their own cultural norms and how these interact with the contexts of their work (Education Centre Against Violence, 2006; Sawrikar & Katz, 2008). Despite an obligation for programs funded by the Commonwealth Family Support Program (including FRCs, family mediation, counselling and support services) to offer accessible, equitable and responsive services, and to engage groups that may have barriers to access (including families from CALD backgrounds; Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006), gaps in equitable service provision and access still exist (Armstrong, 2011a, 2011b).

In a substantive overview of the Family Support Program family law services, the Allen Consulting Group (2013) noted that the capacity of services to adapt and tailor their delivery of services is critical for engaging with target populations.

**MEETING MULTIPLE AND OFTEN CONFLICTING AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF DIVERSE POPULATIONS OF CLIENTS IS A KEY CONSIDERATION AND CHALLENGE**
ENGAGING FAMILIES FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS CONT...

When interviewed, Uniting staff identified that the complexity of engaging with families from diverse backgrounds (notably Indigenous and CALD families) exists at multiple, and perhaps intersecting, aspects of practice. Some participants identified the challenge of engaging with a representative cross-sector of the community, while others highlighted the challenge of competing priorities for practice, and some noted practical challenges such as the use of interpreters:

“We do already get a significant number of CALD clients here, but drilling down I don’t know that they are necessarily reflective of the region. There’s certainly a large Hindi population in this area, and they’re fairly underrepresented in our client base actually.”

(Anonymous)\(^3\)

Culture has also been recognised as influencing the methods of, and the assumptions underpinning, mediators’ practice, as well as what is brought to the mediation by both parties (Armstrong, 2011b). This fits with Alexander’s (2008, p. 98), suggestion that “mediator orientation”—inclusive of the “worldviews, paradigms, behaviours and manner in which they conduct the process”—can influence the agenda for mediation, the standards and norms of behaviour, and the range of possible outcomes the process can achieve. Consistent with this, findings from the interviews with Uniting staff identified that factors contributing to the challenge of working with complexity include the fit between cultural norms and practice models, language and communication needs, and clients’ previous or concurrent experiences of structural and systemic disadvantage and distrust:

But I think, around our cultural groups, we always have to think about—mediation can be completely foreign. There are a lot of countries and cultures that don’t recognise an impartial person. So even in mediation when you’ve said it six times every which way that the mediator can’t provide legal advice and can’t take a position they just will view you as a judge, they will view you as a lawyer, they will view you as someone who is an elder, and so you should be able to tell us what to do. (27M)

The staff from one office saw their approach as treating everybody as an individual regardless of their background, which meant they could successfully work with people from quite diverse backgrounds. This mainly related to their work once families were in the office. Some of their other comments indicated that they were aware of the need to address some of the barriers experienced by families from diverse backgrounds in accessing services, that they made proactive attempts to engage marginalised groups and that they adopted inclusive practices:

Whoever comes through, we treat them the same. Coming through the door for a session, I’m not going, “You’re Aboriginal, therefore I’m going to treat you differently” or “You look like you’re born somewhere else, overseas, and therefore I’m going to—”. I think the basic aspects are all maintained no matter who’s walking through. The curiosity and the interest, the neutrality is maintained ... A simple example is, as they come in, I’m not going, “What is your partner’s name?” or “What is his name?” I’m not asking, “What is his name?” (I’m asking) “Are you in a relationship? What is your partner’s name?” Then if I’m hearing a partner’s name and I’m quite not sure if it’s a male or a female, I would ask, “Is your partner male or female?” (Anonymous)

\(^3\) Participants are quoted anonymously when there is a risk that they could be identified or that their relationship with other staff may be affected.
UNITING STAFF WHO WERE INTERVIEWED IDENTIFIED A NUMBER OF CONSTRUCTIVE STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES,

including the recruitment and retention of a workforce inclusive of different genders, sexualities, cultures and abilities; more dedicated time to be present in and with diverse communities; and consideration of fit and flexibility of technological (and online) service delivery.

These suggestions are in line with those made by Bagshaw et al. (2006) in their consideration of post-separation practice. They highlighted a general lack of understanding of culturally relevant issues among non-Indigenous service providers who have contact with Indigenous people, as well as a need to employ more Indigenous staff and to educate and support those already employed. They also noted that the needs and experiences of Indigenous children and their families are not adequately understood or addressed by non-Indigenous service providers, and that families and children who live in rural and remote areas are more likely to face inadequate service provision.

Similarly, Brown et al. (2012) highlighted capacity building and workforce development initiatives as key strategies for best practice because of the concern that a lack of culturally responsive and bicultural personnel has impeded the effective use of the family law system for clients from diverse backgrounds.

Some staff emphasised the importance of achieving a balance between inclusivity and quality, noting that good practice should remain central to addressing complex presenting issues and contexts. For example, participants spoke about the importance of not compromising quality of service in an effort to employ staff from diverse backgrounds, and suggested that building strong relationships with diverse communities takes time and effort:

> It’s very hard, often, to get professional staff, trained staff, who are from those diverse backgrounds. There’s a lot of languages spoken in some places, but sometimes not fabulous work. So where do you draw the line? (Anonymous)

> It’s not just a one-off visit. I’ve gone and sat down with some of these people. It’s actually having a consistent, ongoing relationship with them all the time and making the time to do that. It’s quite time-consuming, but I think it needs to be done. (02M)

Consistent support for greater workforce capacity was also noted in reports on the Family Support Program’s family law services (Allen Consulting Group, 2013) and community engagement in post-separation services (Family and Relationship Services Australia, 2012). Both reports identified that culturally competent staff with access to ongoing training and supervision, as well as the recruitment and development of staff from target populations, are important “first-step” enablers to engaging with culturally diverse communities. Best practice in working effectively in culturally inclusive and sensitive ways needs to be more than just employing an advisor and/or staff member from underrepresented sections of the population; it also needs to include collaborative and collective ways of working together with the community. Strategies for active inclusive practice include the establishment of advisory committees, engaged collaboration in program co-design and, wherever possible, integration and collaboration between services to support the establishment of appropriate service pathways for easier access, engagement and effective response (Allen Consulting Group, 2013).
GENDER

Changes to the Family Law Act in 2006 encouraged a default assumption that post-separation parents should be supported to share the care of their children in ways that make ongoing meaningful relationships with both parties possible.

These changes have been championed by some as “new recognition” of the importance of fathers in children’s development and wellbeing and, perhaps relatedly, by others as a response to recognition of the missing role that fathers had tended to play in the lives of their children post-separation (Fletcher & St George, 2010; Fletcher & Visser, 2008).

The rapid review suggested that it is important to better understand gender differences in the ways that men and women engage with services and supports, the ways they communicate, the capacity of workers to engage with these differences, and their intersection with cultural differences (Fletcher & Visser, 2008). Addis and Mahalik (2003) suggested that, to date, the development and design of support services may be too normed towards traditionally “feminine” rather than “masculine” means of engagement and problem-solving—relying on an awareness, ability and appreciation of the value of naming and narrating personal issues.

Findings from the interviews with Uniting staff highlighted practitioner awareness of gendered issues in their work and in engaging well with men. In particular, there was concern about the gender balance in mediation, with some staff believing that it could be difficult for people to walk into a room dominated by the opposite gender, and that it would be helpful if there were two mediators of different genders:

“I don’t know how I’d go walking in a room with my, say, ex-husband and two male counsellors. I would struggle with three men. You know, just that sense of non-neutrality. I feel for dads that come here and have mediation, because they have three females in the room at times. How can that not—you know? (33C)

Differences in engagement with services offered and the perception of service outcomes were also noted in the surveys conducted with past Uniting clients. While it should be noted that the number of male respondents was small (n = 23), gendered differences were statistically significant.

Analysis of data from the survey responses found that, overall, the men who responded were less satisfied with the service they had received and were less positive about the outcomes compared with women.

The mean score for every outcome was lower for men than for women. For men, the mean score for all 23 outcome measures (using a five-point Likert scale) was below the midpoint of the Likert scale, but it was below the midpoint for only seven (30%) of the outcomes for women. Sixty per cent of the men indicated that they did not learn any skills compared with 28.3% of women. A number of men were quite unhappy with their experience with Uniting counselling and mediation services and/or the family law system. Seven respondents strongly disagreed with all 23 outcome measures that applied to them, and a further three strongly disagreed with all but one of the outcome measures. Of these 10 people, seven were men and three were women (28.0% of the men compared with 6.5% of the women). A couple of fathers added comments that highlighted their feelings about their experience, noting that their frustration was with the whole system and not just their experience with Uniting:

“I’ve learnt that what the mother wants, the mother gets—simple as that. The laws and the system encourage mothers to do as they please, and there is absolutely nothing a dad can do about it. If both parents wanted each other in their child’s life, it would be that way regardless of any system.

Fathers’ experiences post-separation are likely to be influenced by a wide range of contextual and background factors, including the unique circumstances of the relationship breakdown and factors related to work, age, health, friends and family, previous and current relationships, mental health, social supports, emotional resources, finances and cultural background.

The success of engaging these men in post-separation counselling and mediation services is suggested by Fletcher and Visser (2008) to ultimately be tied to the outcomes achieved in terms of post-separation parenting plans and the wellbeing of children. They suggested that how well these outcomes are achieved will be determined by the skillset of practitioners and their awareness and willingness to recognise the gendered needs and nuances of their work.
Resources and funding for post-separation services and supports were discussed in the evidence reviewed—primarily in relation to complex presenting issues and corresponding models of response. These included screening and assessment of safety and risk in contexts of domestic violence (Field & Lynch, 2014; Robinson & Moloney, 2010), child inclusive models of practice (Bagshaw et al., 2006; Hart, 2009) and work with families from culturally diverse backgrounds (Armstrong, 2011a, 2011b).Uniting staff who were interviewed highlighted the tensions between best practice and appropriate resources and funding. They identified that working with complex issues often requires more time- and resource-intensive responses, and that without adequate funding, they cannot provide the service they want to:

> If we’re going to provide best practice, then we really need to have the resources available, and best practice for me does include either someone talking about developmental needs, someone who can see the kids and feedback information to the parents, because that’s the way in. (36M)

Some staff indicated that they can use the more resource-intensive programs as often as they want, but this was mainly in relation to programs that they felt were occasionally helpful but not central to best practice:

> Look, with child inclusive, I would say it’s there and use it. In fact, I made a referral last week. There was another referral made the week before. [Name of worker] only has so much time, but they don’t come in constantly, so they are not beating it off with a stick. So, that’s always available or appears to be always available. (11M)
PRACTICE APPROACH & MODEL
FLEXIBILITY & FIT

“Different things work for different clients”

FLEXIBILITY ACROSS PRACTITIONERS’ ROLES WAS SEEN AS IMPORTANT IN PROMOTING COLLABORATION & COOPERATION

Practice that is facilitative (i.e., focuses on process and problem, promotes self-determination, and is attentive to emotional needs) and flexible (i.e., not prescriptive or “one-size-fits-all”) were highlighted as being important in both the reviewed literature and the interviews with Uniting staff. Interviews with staff highlighted that flexibility is central to Uniting’s practice approach because, as one staff member suggested, “different things work for different clients” (01C).

Although there are clear policies and procedures, practitioners generally felt that they can exercise flexibility in their approach, which allows them to adapt to the particular circumstances of the families they work with:

“So we have quite flexible models and I think that’s one of the really unique aspects of working for Uniting is because we have clear policies and procedures each step, and we have had those developed to be really practical for practitioners to draw from. But we also know that families come in all shapes and sizes. (27M).

Flexibility underpinned many of the approaches used or recommended by the staff who were interviewed. Examples of flexibility include being able to use a variety of models or approaches to mediation; staff being given the time to build relationships with particular communities; the use of technology; the client-centred approach, whereby families are treated as being individual and unique; the number of sessions; and the fee structure.

As one staff member suggested, it is important to “fit programs around the needs of people and tailor them to the needs of families rather than having a one-size-fits-all kind of approach” (07M):

The fact that it’s such flexible work to be determining what we need for each child, and for each child to have a different approach around what we do with them in that counselling room is one of the strengths, I think. Being able to have that freedom around to decide whether we see kids individually, which is what we usually do, or whether we bring the family in and do some family work or relationship work. To have that flexibility, to have those conversations with parents on the phone. (29A)
Flexibility was also discussed by practitioners in relation to the roles that staff undertake in their practice. Flexibility within practitioners’ roles was seen as important in promoting collaborative and cooperative practice. For example, in one office, staff spoke about being able to bring in a counsellor to a mediation session if something came up and the mediator thought it would be helpful to have some immediate input from one of the counselling or Anchor teams:

*They’re better at explaining it [what would be helpful for the children], so we’ll go and grab [a counsellor] and say, “Have you got five minutes? Would you like to come in and introduce yourself to Sally and Fred Bloggs? They’re sort of wondering about Anchor, or they’re sort of wondering about CIP [child inclusive practice]”. So we’ve now started to do that routinely. (11M)*

At times, staff stepped out of conventional roles for counsellors and mediators because they felt their client needed more support, and either other services were not available or a more flexible approach was required:

*So that’s a challenge, when it goes beyond our role and we’re ringing around, and there’s really nowhere to refer to. So it’s how to support her to—you know, this woman is engaged with us. We can’t get rid of her now. So how to support staff to support clients that are probably a bit beyond their role. (33C)*

The Allen Consulting Group (2013, p. 45) suggested that continuing to provide flexibility for responsive models of practice will help encourage a “no wrong door” experience of post-separation services and supports. These observations are consistent with earlier recommendations made by Kaspiew et al. (2009), who noted that initiatives that are designed to promote a shared commitment between mediators and other service sector professionals will improve the efficacy of services (FDR in particular) and the family law system in general.

These interdisciplinary co-mediation models (often, at least historically, delivered by male/female pairs) have a history of use in Australia and overseas dating back to the late 1970s (Black & Joffee, 1978; Gold, 1984; Mosten & Biggs, 1986; Wiseman & Fiske, 1980). Co-mediation models have significant benefits—in terms of supporting diversified and specialised input, and helping to balance gender and power dynamics and input—but are also challenged by logistics, financial feasibility and issues tied to relational quality between workers (Smyth & Moloney, 2003).

Moloney et al. (2013) recognised that:

**Support in the post-separation space does not belong to any one professional group and there is no single approach.**

They suggested that progress towards better outcomes, especially for families with complex needs, is connected to the capacity of mediation and counselling services to link their service delivery response to other local services.

Referring to the sentiments of Hollonds et al. (2012), the authors noted that what is increasingly recognised is the need for parallel processes and partnerships between practitioners across the family law system (particularly lawyers and counsellors) to work together in encouraging the same of their clients, with the common goal of advocating for the best interests of children (Moloney et al., 2013).
MEDIATION AS INTERVENTION

When considering the form and function of mediation practice, a common distinction is made in the literature between “directive” and “facilitative” mediation practice (Baitar et al., 2012b; Charkoudian, De Ritis, Buck, & Wilson, 2009; Currie, 2004; Mayer, 2004; Riskin, 1996). These describe not only the style of work and what it looks like in practice, but also what is assumed to be the intended function or outcomes of that practice (Alexander, 2008). Haynes, Haynes and Sun Fong (2004) suggested that mediators, in general terms, tend to either intervene in relation to the problem or the process, depending on their understanding of their role and the intended outcomes of their work.

Mediators who focus on the process of mediation tend to seek a holistic understanding of the issue from the parties involved, draw out perspectives and viewpoints, and facilitate and empower participants to resolve the problem on their own terms (Alexander, 2008). A focus on process reflects a value of self-determination for those who are party to the mediation, as well as evidence that collaboratively designed, self-directed agreements are more likely to hold than directed ones (Moore, 2003). Beck and Sales (2001) echoed the value of mediation in terms of empowerment and self-determination, noting that allowing parties to draft agreements within laws of fairness, and providing opportunities for grievances to be heard, results in agreements that are more likely to satisfy both parties.

Baitar et al. (2012a, 2012b) emphasised that regardless of focus and approach, the perception that clients hold of the mediator as facilitative is essential and has a positive effect on wellbeing, independent of the outcome reached. Facilitative mediators are described as typically displaying interest-based and process-oriented problem-solving behaviours, and as being more impartial, empathic and informal compared with mediators who are often encountered by separating partners in a litigation-based system (Mayer, 2004; Riskin, 1996). Central to the conceptualisation of facilitative styles of mediation are the principles of self-determination and the primacy of the participants. As Field and Crowe (2017) noted, “the parties are the protagonists in the process—negotiating on their own behalf; articulating their own stories, interests, issues and concerns; and giving voice to the needs and interests of their children” (p. 85).

UNITING’S CLEAR FOCUS ON THE WELLBEING OF THE CHILD MEANS THAT MEDIATORS ACT AS “ADVOCATES FOR WHAT IS IN THE CHILD’S BEST INTERESTS” (25CM)

FROM A FACILITATIVE PERSPECTIVE

the mediator is expected to use a range of process and communication skills to enable the parties to engage in cooperative and collaborative bargaining. However, the authors also suggested that mediators have a central role and an ethical obligation in this process to support self-determination by being acutely aware of the barriers to participation, including the opaque underlying expectations and aspirations structured into mediation processes by the surrounding legal framework and its processes and practices (Field & Crowe, 2017).

Calls for process-oriented facilitative approaches were echoed by Bowling and Hoffman (2000, p. 21) who advocated for an ‘integrated model’ of mediation in which the mediator has significant opportunities to shape the interactions and discussions of the parties involved. They argued that the relationships of the parties to each other and to the mediator are fluid, and that the parties’ expectation that the mediator will be able to assist them in reaching a resolution contribute to the mediator’s influence (Bowling & Hoffman, 2000).

A focus on process does not necessarily negate discourse about the problem; rather, because process is inclusive of all aspects of the mediation (including the agenda, language used, seating, and order and flow of questions), mediator orientation can shape what is discussed and how it is discussed (Alexander, 2008).

Mediators believe that it is important for best practice that they can focus on more than just the process of the work:

I think one of the great things about the way Uniting works in mediation is we don’t have a pure facilitative model. So we don’t purely say, “What is your proposal? Okay, well you haven’t agreed here. Are there any other ideas?” We don’t keep it at that level; actually we challenge, we weave children’s information in, we use development information, we ask them whether they’ve done that before. We ask them to think about communication differently, and we’ve always taken that approach. So in terms of our work, we are more of an intervention-type approach than other FDR providers. (27M)
MEDIATION AS INTERVENTION CONT...

Some mediators who were interviewed placed a greater emphasis on the importance of neutrality and impartiality and tried to focus mainly on the process without influencing the agreement. At times, this was connected to a recognition that mediators do not necessarily share the values and experiences of the families they work with, and mediators do not want to impose their own values on the outcomes:

Well, research says that you can’t be impartial—that you bring who you are to that role, and yes I do, but I would say that I would work very hard at not allowing my own beliefs, my own values, my own principles to get in the way of whatever I am doing or whoever I am working with. So for me it’s more about neutrality, not judging, not bringing any of my beliefs, values into the room, but just sitting with people, allowing people to be who they are and to be able to be at whatever stage of their development that they’re at. (36M)

An important strategy in maintaining a level of neutrality and impartiality, while also allowing other information to be presented that addresses the best interests of the child or other important issues, is the use of approaches such as CIP, hybrid models (involving a counsellor and a mediator) and legally assisted mediation:

But then you’ll have a client that will be so sensitive to bias that we have to draw back and go, “I can’t even put that neutral information there about what two-year-olds can cope with without a parent believing that’s biased in favour of, or against, or whatever”. So we use hybrid models with the therapists. We use child inclusive practice with a consultant so that we can say, “Well we’re going to be quite facilitative because look over there, here’s some information that someone has done. They’re not doing it because they’re biased; they’re doing it because your kids said this”. (27M)

These types of approaches allow mediation to address more complex issues and contexts where straight mediation might be inappropriate (e.g., where there is a history of domestic violence) or where there are other issues that mean the parties need more support to reach agreements that are just and that protect the interests of the children.

The online survey of past Uniting clients indicated that mediation assisted clients to develop skills and resolve issues. Respondents were asked to identify skills and behaviours that they acquired or strengthened as a result of their engagement with Uniting services. These included skills and behaviours relating to parenting, conflict resolution, communication, coping and stress management, and decision-making. Overall, 43 respondents (61% of 71 completed surveys) reported that they had developed one or more skills. It is important to note that some respondents attended more than one service, and that there was a small sample size (particularly for some services). Of the 50 people who attended mediation services, 60% (n = 30) reported an increase in one or more skills—most frequently conflict resolution and decision-making skills. Similarly, five of the eight respondents (62.5%) who reported having attended child inclusive mediation services said they had developed one or more skills. The skills most likely to be identified as being developed were conflict resolution skills and communications skills (37.5% each). While not the specific focus of the intervention, these results highlight the potential for the process of facilitative practice to achieve outcomes broader than those set in mediation.
Evidence from the Rapid Review, interviews with Uniting staff and the survey of past clients identified the challenges of finding and forming a strong engagement, particularly with men and families from diverse cultural backgrounds (as discussed above). In the survey, satisfaction and connection outcomes were assessed as related indicators of client engagement, service efficacy and likely relational rapport between the service provider and the respondent.

Authentic Engagement

There were moderate-to-high positive correlations between all client satisfaction and connection outcomes, meaning that as satisfaction and/or connection in one domain increased, so did satisfaction and/or connection in another. Particular practice factors found to influence client satisfaction were feeling that their needs were heard ($r = .82, p = < .01$), feeling that their children’s needs were heard ($r = .77, p = < .01$), feeling that they were better at hearing their children’s needs ($r = .79, p = < .01$) and feeling that things were better for them and their children overall ($r = .85, p = < .01$). High correlations between factors demonstrated that each factor greatly influenced clients’ overall satisfaction with the service they received from Uniting. Thus, they are important factors to focus on when providing services to clients.

Another important finding was that respondents agreeing that they would recommend Uniting counselling and mediation to others was also highly positively correlated with feeling that their needs were heard ($r = .79, p = < .01$), feeling that their children’s needs were heard ($r = .76, p = < .01$), feeling that they were better at hearing their children’s needs ($r = .79, p = < .01$) and feeling that things were better for their children ($r = .86, p = < .01$).

Thus, the findings demonstrated that clients are more likely to be satisfied with the service they receive and more likely to recommend Uniting to others if they feel that their needs and the needs of their children have been heard, if they are better able to hear their children’s needs and if they feel that things are better for them and their children overall.

Overall, male respondents were less satisfied with the service they had received and were less positive about the outcomes compared with the women.

Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis is presented in the full report about the survey and includes frequency counts, cross-tabulations, correlation analyses, independent samples t-tests, exploratory factor analysis and internal reliability analyses.
SPECIALIST SERVICE PROVISION

The findings from the literature review, interviews with Uniting staff and survey of past Uniting clients identified the importance of the specialised context of post-separation services. These include working with mandated clients (who often have differing expectations regarding service delivery and outcomes) and practice considerations such as confidentiality, impartiality and neutrality in practice.

Some staff who were interviewed suggested that one of the things that sets Uniting apart from other family and relationship services is its focus on offering a range of child- and family-focused services within the context of family law and post-separation. Uniting’s expertise in working with families in the specific context of family law and post-separation, as well as their ability to offer a suite of programs, is important:

*I think the biggest strength, compared to all the other organisations in the family law sector, is they have this really good lens of working in family law and understanding of the court system, families that are going through separation and what is needed by families in the process of separation and after. You know you start with mediation, and then you try some therapy—if that doesn’t really work then you go to the family courts. So I think they have a really good family law lens, which is probably a strength and it is a well-known in the industry as one of those organisations that would be very good in this—for family law counselling. We have a suite of counselling programs, so families can come here and have a number of different interventions (e.g., mediation, children’s counselling, group work and individual counselling).* (32A)

For the Uniting counsellors who were interviewed, working with involuntary or mandated clients who had been ordered to attend counselling by the court could be a significant challenge, particularly in relation to engaging them and dealing with resistance. Some staff suggested that working with mandated clients could be “grinding” and that it took its toll on workers. But at the same time, there could be benefits in working with mandated clients, especially in relation to people receiving counselling and support who otherwise would not have been willing to attend. Around one-third of respondents to the online survey (33.8%) reported being court-ordered to attend services, with the most common service attended being mediation. As noted in the discussion of the gendered differences between survey respondents, it appears as if male and female respondents had differing expectations of service outcomes and hence reported different levels of satisfaction with the outcomes achieved.

A COMMON AND CONTESTED ISSUE FACING PARENTS POST-SEPARATION IS THE DIVISION OF TIME THAT COMES WITH SHARED CARE

Parkinson (2014) highlighted that while there is no set definition of what shared care means, there is widespread agreement that it need not mean equal time. As Parkinson noted, guidelines or presumptions surrounding shared care as equating to equal time can feed into an agenda of parental rights or adult notions of equality that are antithetical to the development of child-focused arrangements. The appropriately described “conundrum” for practice supporting families post-separation is that the developmental needs of young children for healthy attachment fostered by consistency, reliability, stability and connection can be undermined by frequent transitions and the absence of either parent typically involved in shared care (Kelly & Lamb, 2000; McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008).
The challenges for practice were well articulated by Fletcher and Visser (2008):

The affective burden carried by parents seeking assistance from mediation, counselling and related services presents a challenge for staff since, most commonly, their task is simultaneously to acknowledge the difficulties faced by each parent, while focusing on the goal of developing satisfactory child-focused parenting arrangements. (p. 54)

As identified in the rapid review, confidentiality has long been considered crucial to the felt safety, sense of trust and likelihood of authentic engagement between individuals and support services, and has long been accepted as inherently important to mediation (Harman, 2011). However, as demonstrated by the staff interviews, it is highly complex in the post-separation space. As staff identified, Uniting has “very strict guidelines on how to report back to court” to ensure they do not “put the client in trouble” (19C), which some staff believed was important:

We’ve got really good ethical reasons why we hold strong with [the policy on confidentiality]—like not providing reports. For us, that’s a real strong practice guideline because it’s safe, it needs to be safe. Many of the children have had some little moments where they’ve said something to one of the child inclusive lawyers and then it gets thrown out in court and then one parent will hold it against the child. “You told them this”. It’s had huge impacts on these children so they come in very nervous and scared and we can reassure them it doesn’t go outside that room. They just suddenly feel like, “Oh, I can feel safe here and I can talk about things I can’t with anybody else here”. So it’s really important. (04C)

But other staff, while recognising the importance of confidentiality in creating a safe place where clients can speak openly, suggested that it also creates a dilemma at times, especially in relation to the wellbeing of children:

INNOVATIVE HYBRID PRACTICE MODELS SUPPORT COMPLEX ISSUES TO BE SAFELY RESOLVED

We’re very limited in what we can share if there are other people working with a family. Sometimes they might find that a bit of a problem. Look, we can be a little bit more flexible where there are safety concerns, but generally speaking there’s very limited information that we can give ... I can see why it is like that, but I do think there could be some room for some more flexibility there, that it could be helpful at times to be able to share more information where different services are working together with a family. (05AC)
DIFFERENT MODELS

In the reviewed literature, a total of 115 sources described models, approaches, perspectives, frameworks and skills for practice in the post-separation space, most of which were highly descriptive. Promising practice profiles promote the adoption or strengthening of particular skills (e.g., motivational interviewing) or more joined-up, collaborative or coordinated approaches.

As discussed above, the staff who were interviewed identified that one of Uniting’s strengths is that it offers a range of child- and family-focused services. Not all models are offered in each office, mainly due to the differences in funding for each office (e.g., only some offices are funded for the Post-Orders Parenting Program called Keeping Contact). When discussing how they work, staff reflected on their evolving thinking and approaches to work, as well as the perceived effectiveness of different models of practice. Among the participating staff, there were, at times, varying opinions about some of the models, with some staff thinking a model was quite effective, and others having doubts.

An example of a model for which there was a range of opinions was Keeping Contact, a specialist therapeutic service for enmeshed and high-conflict families, who were usually court-ordered to attend the program. While some staff thought Keeping Contact was a “powerful” (01C) or even “brilliant” model (15C), others had concerns (e.g., regarding its rigidity or open-ended nature) or wondered about its effectiveness. The online survey of past Uniting clients found that half (50.0%) of the 20 respondents who had used Keeping Contact said they had developed one or more skills, with 30% improving their parenting skills, 30% improving their communications skills and 25% improving their conflict resolution skills. In considering these results, it should be remembered that the families who use Keeping Contact are generally experiencing entrenched conflict, which makes it a difficult context to work in. As one practitioner suggested:

The Keeping Contact work is particularly difficult because of the—I guess the high level of animosity between the people that you’re trying to bring together onto the same page in order to make things better for their kids. So you’re dealing with that highly conflictual, almost like, “I’m going to disagree with my ex-partner just because that’s my default position because they’re my ex”. (01C)

At times, the different opinions about programs appeared to result from different understandings about how the model was implemented. This may indicate differences between offices or highlight the emphasis that staff place on flexibility and the ability to adapt to the specific contexts of families.

UNITING STAFF SPOKE POSITIVELY ABOUT COLLABORATIVE MODELS OF MEDIATION AND COUNSELLING

including CFDR, a pilot program that had worked with families who had a history of domestic violence. CFDR (Field & Lynch, 2014) exemplified the value of collaborative practice and acknowledging that complex needs of clients experiencing family violence are best met in ways that are responsive to need and not by any one profession or single approach (Moloney, Kaspiew, DeMaio, & Deblaquiere, 2013). CFDR assessed risk and safety through the determination of a “predominant aggressor” among the parties and an emphasis on perpetrator accountability.

Identifying the predominant aggressor involved considering the context and pattern of the violence, the history of the violence in the relationship, which person had been exerting power and control over the other, which person was fearful of the other and whether any violent behaviour on the part of the victim was in retaliation against the predominant aggressor or in self-defence (Field & Lynch, 2014).
A key component of the CFDR mediation model was the legal advocacy and support provided for the parties. The CFDR model emphasised access to independent legal advice for victims at three distinct stages of the process: before mediation, to ensure informed consent to the process and/or alternatives to mediation and coaching; during mediation for advocacy and/or support; and after mediation for safety and support, making the agreement legally binding, and for advice in the event of a breach (Brown, Batagol, & Sourdin, 2012).

While facilitative and focused on self-determination, the CFDR model acknowledged that the self-determination imperative of the mediation process can work against hearing the voices of vulnerable parties (Field, 1996, 2004, 2006, 2010).

This is because family mediation requires vulnerable parties to negotiate on their own behalf, and this task is complicated by the fact that experiences of violence can significantly affect a survivor’s capacity to clearly identify and articulate their own needs and interests, to argue rationally for outcomes that can satisfy those interests (and those of their children), and to be creative in generating options to resolve the dispute (Field & Lynch, 2014).

Barriers to CFDR can include constructions of family violence, organisational policy and operational practice, as well as inherent “culture clashes” between professions—particularly lawyers and other practitioners (Hollonds et al., 2012; Kaspiew et al., 2009).

Within Uniting, there is strong support for CFDR and staff spoke highly about its potential to make a difference in quite complex cases.
OUTCOMES & OUTCOME MEASUREMENT
Outcomes models of practice, now required by many funding frameworks, emphasise the link between program goals, activities, outputs AND outcomes. Understanding the outcomes of service and support delivery in the community sector has long been acknowledged as both a necessity and a challenge (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003). Interviews with Uniting staff found that they are generally confident that their work is achieving outcomes; that is, that it makes a difference to client wellbeing.

Some staff said they were able to see change (e.g., within a session or in the way in which families interacted) or that families had told them that things had improved.

Other ways in which staff know they have made a difference are when they receive thanks such as “a little card or gift” (13AC), when clients finish up but return some years later for further support, and when families are referred by another family:

Someone reports to be doing things differently with their child or I see the way that they talk about their child’s behaviour or their ex-partner’s communication ... So, when I see more flexibility and less rigidity in clients, that’s when I know we sort of are going on a good path. Also, I suppose where if you know a child hasn’t been seeing a parent and then they are and that seems to be safe contact, and this parent who was maybe saying that that parent was unsafe for a long time is now actually not engaging in that dialogue because their anxiety has lowered through this process, then it actually—things going okay. So, when I see relationships being repaired and functioning. (20C)

With due caution given to limitations of the sample size and the response rate across client populations and service type, the survey of past clients also identified areas of growth and change across outcomes measured. The survey explored outcomes consistent with the Department of Social Services’ SCORE matrix, recognising that clients’ life circumstances change as a result of increased knowledge, skills and changed behaviour, and changes are sustained by increased coping, confidence and connection. Legal outcomes (regarding family law agreements reached and avoidance of family law court) were also explored. Outcomes were assessed in relation to changes perceived and reported by the respondents regarding their child, their parenting, their own coping with family breakdown and their interactions with the family law court system.

On average, survey respondents did not identify knowledge gains as a result of their engagement with Uniting. However, positive correlations between different knowledge areas showed that gains in one area of knowledge were associated with gains across other types of knowledge.

Gains in knowledge related to the self were more common than those related to perspective-taking in relation to the other parent.
The acquisition or strengthening of skills (and behaviours) relating to parenting, conflict resolution, communication, coping and stress management, and decision-making were assessed for respondents across all service types. The most common service engagement for respondents in the sample was mediation, where skill-building may have limited attention and focus (particularly in the minds of participating families). In comparison, for the small number of respondents who reported having used the Anchor program, 67% (n = 6) reported an increase in their parenting skills, 56% (n = 5) reported strengthening their coping and stress management skills, and 56% reported an increase in their decision-making skills. Likewise, 43% of respondents (n = 6) who attended adult counselling reported an increase in their coping and stress management skills.

Gender effects were observed among correlations for skills (and behaviour)-based outcomes. For the 46 female respondents, there were moderate positive correlations between all skill increases, meaning that if the respondent reported an increase in one skill, they were likely to report an increase in other skills. For male respondents, there was only one moderate positive correlation (r = .41, p < .05) present, whereby the greater the increase in decision-making skills, the greater the increase in conflict resolution skills, and vice versa.

Outcomes relating to improved coping and confidence were explored through perceived and reported increases in coping and confidence for the respondent and their parenting and co-parenting interactions post-family breakdown, as well as their interactions with the family law system. In general, respondents tended to indicate a lack of growth in confidence and connection across these factors. Exceptions to this were improvements to respondents’ own coping in response to family breakdown and feeling better able to help their child respond to the same. Increases in these two areas were positively correlated with growth across other areas of coping and confidence.

As identified above, satisfaction and connection outcomes were assessed in the client survey as related indicators of client engagement, service efficacy and likely relational rapport between the service provider and the respondent. Survey items were also assessed for increases in both receptive and expressive empathy5 (driven by connection) in relation to “being able to hear” the needs of others and “feeling heard”. In total, eight survey items related to satisfaction and connection outcomes. On average, respondents tended to disagree with each of these statements: only two of the eight outcomes were above the midpoint of the five-point Likert scale. Consistent with other outcome domains, items that related personally to the respondent and their own feelings of being heard, hearing their child and being satisfied with services provided were more likely to be agreed with than questions related to hearing the needs of the other parent and, perhaps relatedly, satisfaction with parenting agreements reached and feeling that things are better for them.

It should be noted that there were a number of indications that at least some respondents focused on negative experiences. For example, seven respondents (9.9%) strongly disagreed with all of the relevant questions based on the five-point Likert scale, and one respondent indicated that she based her answers on the more negative of two different experiences.

5 Receptive empathy is being able to identify the emotions of others, and expressive empathy is the ability to convey that understanding to others
OUTCOME MEASUREMENT

The characteristic challenges of outcome measurement in the post-separation practice context described above were echoed in the sentiments of Uniting staff who were interviewed. There was a fairly widely held belief among participants that outcome measurement was difficult, “tricky” or complex.

**ONE OF THE MAJOR CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED WAS DECIDING WHAT TO MEASURE AND DETERMINING “WHAT CONSTITUTES IMPROVEMENT”** (26CM)

For example, interview participants suggested that while reaching an agreement in mediation can be an indication of a positive outcome, there are also limitations because an agreement or parenting plan that is not honoured may be less successful than a mediation in which the parties fail to reach an agreement but improve their communication. Likewise, keeping a family together is not always a positive outcome in counselling (e.g., where children are exposed to domestic violence):

*The fact that people can put something down on paper or come up with a verbal agreement and walk out the door doesn’t necessarily mean that it becomes a successful agreement or outcome for that family. But agreements can fall over as soon as you walk out the door. People who don’t make agreements in mediation sometimes later informally make arrangements that last a long time.* (07M)

Other challenges include difficulties in following up with clients to explore longer-term impact, how to measure aspects like emotional intelligence, the variety of services/processes and potential outcomes, limitations of self-reporting, and the subjective nature of many outcomes. Some staff suggested that a longer-term outcome measurement is particularly difficult because people often use Uniting’s services at a particularly difficult time in their lives, and they do not want to revisit the experience later:

*What I find really difficult is that when people come to us, they come to us at such a vulnerable and emotional time in their life... Their feedback is three to six months after having service, and usually they’ve moved on so far that they don’t really want to remember this stuff, so it’s really difficult.*

In short, the work we do is so complex and intricate, and it’s at a very difficult time in people’s lives, so it’s really hard to get, I feel, an accurate outcome to how much you’ve helped. (26CM)

Reflecting debates in the wider sector (e.g., Claes et al., 2015; Epstein, 2009), a few staff emphasised the potential value of measures that are more quantitative, validated and objective, and that do not rely on self-reporting. Others advocated for more qualitative measures that reflect people’s individual experience and recognise the broad range of potential outcomes.
Again, reflecting the broader debates, some staff felt there would be value in having consistent and formalised approaches to outcome measurement across Uniting, while others would prefer more practice- and practitioner-driven approaches:

I actually think if there were some review points along the way that caused practitioner reflection and also allowed you to think about the family, so you did a three, six, nine, 12-month review where you actually assessed how they were going according to some sort of criteria, that maybe that might keep a bit more shape in the program and keep us a little bit more accountable.

(Anonymous)

Well who is it [formal assessment tools] helpful for? It’s not helpful for the client—an assessment tool about outcomes—because they’re already telling us that they’re feeling better; now they have to fill in a form. So the helpfulness is for us to get funding, isn’t it? At the end of the day we’re not assessing them to help them.

(Anonymous)

Since the interviews, the Uniting Research and Social Policy team have held staff consultations about outcome measurement and are working towards a tool that can be used across the counselling and mediation services. To support these efforts, the usefulness of the items used in the client survey were considered. Exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the main factors theorised in the survey (outcomes for children, outcomes for respondent, parenting outcomes, co-parenting outcomes and satisfaction with Uniting services). It identified item redundancy and low internal reliability and loading in 11 out of 23 survey items. Strategies for a future survey measurement are detailed in a separate report (“Uniting Client Experience and Outcome: Statistical Analysis of Survey Results”). In summary, the deletion of redundant items (and, in one instance, the merging of two items into one) could reduce the survey size and associated client burden while increasing measure validity and reliability.

In addition to demographic data, service engagement details and outcomes measured by categorical response (e.g., those regarding the type of skills acquired or strengthened, whether a parenting agreement was reached and whether clients avoided going to court), a total of 12 survey items related to client, child, parenting, co-parenting, satisfaction with service received and parenting agreement reached are suggested for consideration in any future outcome measures survey. The suggestions made are shown in Table 1 alongside details of the survey distributed to past Uniting clients in Part C of the research program.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNITING CLIENT SURVEY (as distributed)</th>
<th>RECOMMENDATIONS Future Survey Measurement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome Factor = Outcomes for Children</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue = 3.11; explained 77.84% of variance; $\alpha = .90$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, things are better for me and my children</td>
<td>Overall, I feel things are better and safer for me and my children</td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel things are safer for me and my children</td>
<td>$\leftarrow$ Combine $\rightarrow$</td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel my children’s needs were heard</td>
<td>I feel my children’s needs were heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My children better understand what is happening</td>
<td>$\times$</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome Factor = Outcomes for Respondent</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue = 4.34; explained 72.44% of variance; $\alpha = .92$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know more about my own responses to family breakdown</td>
<td>I am managing my own feelings and reactions to family breakdown better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am managing my own feelings and reactions to family breakdown better</td>
<td>$\checkmark$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel less distressed and more hopeful</td>
<td>I know more about the importance of managing conflict post-separation</td>
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<tr>
<td>I know more about the importance of managing conflict post-separation</td>
<td>$\checkmark$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel more confident in engaging with the family law system</td>
<td>I feel more confident in engaging with the family law system</td>
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<tr>
<td>I know more about the family law system</td>
<td>$\times$</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome Factor = Parenting Outcomes</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue = 3.40; explained 84.87% of variance; $\alpha = .94$</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I am better able to help my child cope with family breakdown</td>
<td>I am better able to help my child cope with family breakdown</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am better at hearing my children’s needs</td>
<td>$\times$</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am better able to focus on the best interests of my children</td>
<td>I am better able to focus on the best interests of my children</td>
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<tr>
<td>I know more about the needs of children after families separate</td>
<td>$\times$</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome Factor = Co-Parenting Outcomes</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue = 3.91; explained 78.15% of variance; $\alpha = .93$</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I know more about how the other parent sees things</td>
<td>I know more about how the other parent sees things</td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel more confident in working through conflict with the other parent</td>
<td>I feel more confident working through conflict with the other parent</td>
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<tr>
<td>I find it easier and less stressful to interact with the other parent</td>
<td>$\times$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel the other parent is better able to focus on the best interests of the children</td>
<td>I feel the other parent is better able to focus on the best interests of the children</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am better at hearing the needs of the other parent</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome Factor = Satisfaction with Uniting Services</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue = 3.91; explained 78.15% of variance; $\alpha = .93$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would recommend Uniting family counselling and mediation to others</td>
<td>I would recommend Uniting family counselling and mediation to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel my needs were heard</td>
<td>$\times$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, I am satisfied with the service I received from Uniting</td>
<td>$\times$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome Factor = Satisfaction with Parenting Agreement</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with the parenting agreement reached</td>
<td>$\checkmark$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE EXTENSIVE PROGRAM OF COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH THAT WAS UNDERTAKEN EXPLORED POST-SEPARATION COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION SERVICES OFFERED BY UNITING

IT FOCUSED ON THREE BROAD RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

ONE What does the existing evidence base identify as principles for best practice in terms of post-separation counselling and mediation services?

TWO How do Uniting’s counselling and mediation services achieve positive outcomes for its clients?

THREE How can counselling and mediation services measure the impact/outcomes of their services?

The research was implemented in three phases (Parts A–C), with data sourced from the existing literature, interviews with Uniting staff, an online survey of past Uniting clients and a review of Uniting policy and practice documents. Findings from the data analysis are discussed in greater detail in four separate reports:

1. Contemporary evidence for best practice in post-separation counselling and mediation: A rapid review
2. What describes and characterises Uniting services? Analysis of interviews with Uniting staff
3. Uniting client experience and outcome: Statistical analysis of survey results

The research suggests that, while there is always room for improvement, Uniting is generally working to best practice, particularly in relation to practice that is flexible, facilitative and fit for purpose. Further, Uniting maintains and supports skilled workers and has a clear focus on the wellbeing of children. (See pages 55–57 for more details of the key findings.)

Any organisation has variations in the skills and experience of staff, so processes are needed to provide extra support to those who need it. It appears as though Uniting has these processes in place, particularly through strong supervision.

Despite these concerns, the research suggests that Uniting counselling and mediation services are built on a very solid foundation and have much to contribute in terms of best practice. At times, anecdotal information that was incidental to the research reinforced this perception. At the 2018 Family and Relationships Services Australia National Conference, one of the researchers attended a presentation on the national trial of CFDR and asked if there had been variations between sites. The authors of the CFDR evaluation suggested that, based on the whole trial (and not just what was reported in the evaluation), the Uniting sites were the most successful.

IT IS CLEAR THAT UNITING IS AN INNOVATIVE ORGANISATION THAT ENCOURAGES STAFF TO CRITICALLY REFLECT ON PRACTICE.

Issues raised in draft reports about outcome measurement have already been addressed, and as part of their ongoing work, the Uniting Research and Social Policy team is collaborating with the counselling and mediation services to create new outcome measures. It is this type of commitment to best practice that places Uniting counselling and mediation services in a good position to continue providing high quality services to families facing separation.
SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

RELATED TO RESEARCH QUESTION 1: What does the existing evidence base identify as principles for best practice in terms of post-separation counselling and mediation services?

BEST PRACTICE IS flexible, facilitative and fit for purpose

PRACTITIONERS ARE critical for best practice outcomes

BEST PRACTICE IS responsive to context and complexity and requires a nuanced appreciation of the factors that frame clients’ experiences and likely outcomes

BEST PRACTICE NEEDS TO be able to meet multiple and often conflicting aims and objectives of diverse populations of clients

HOW ARE THESE PRINCIPLES FOR BEST PRACTICE IMPLEMENTED WITHIN UNITING’S COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION SERVICES?

- Uniting appears to be generally demonstrating best practice.
- There are good policies and practice guides in place, combined with strong supervision.
- There is a clear focus on the wellbeing of children.
- There are good staff who are supported well.
- Hybrid models of mediation allow more complex issues to be addressed.
- Uniting has specialist expertise in the context of post-separation and offers a range of child- and family-focused services that are responsive to context.

HOW CAN CURRENT PRACTICE IN UNITING’S COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION SERVICES INFORM BEST PRACTICE AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION ACROSS THE SECTOR?

- There is a focus on best practice and continual improvement. Uniting adopts a collaborative, flexible approach.
- There is a consistent focus on the wellbeing of children. There are experienced staff who reflect on practice.
- There are a range of models that can adapt to specific contexts.
- Mediators focus on more than the process of mediation.
- Uniting could undertake evaluations of innovative practice and share the results with the broader sector.
- The recent focus on outcome measurement has potential implications for other organisations.

WHAT CHANGES COULD BE MADE TO IMPROVE THE ALIGNMENT BETWEEN BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES AND SERVICE DELIVERY?

- While there are clearly many examples of best practice, care needs to be taken to ensure that this is the case consistently throughout the organisation; thus, there needs to be a continued focus on processes for monitoring and support when practice is less than ideal or when staff are new.
- Continue to provide space and support for staff to critically reflect on practice and to explore innovation, particularly in complex contexts (e.g., engaging diverse families and men; domestic violence).
- Explore strategies for:
  - recruiting and supporting diversity in staff without compromising quality
  - prioritising safety (e.g., in cases of domestic violence) and providing intensive service delivery
  - diversifying the voices in/of policy and practice documents
  - creating practice notes to assist in addressing the complexities of practice
  - increasing the focus on relationship-building and care for the other person in practice documents
  - increasing collaboration while maintaining confidentiality.
RELATED TO RESEARCH QUESTION 2: How do Uniting’s counselling and mediation services achieve positive outcomes for their clients?

BEST PRACTICE is flexible, facilitative and fit for purpose

PRACTITIONERS are critical for best practice outcomes

BY PROVIDING SERVICES that are aligned with best practice (see Research Question 1a and b in Figure 7).

POSITIVE OUTCOMES ARE MOST LIKELY WHEN:
- practice is flexible, facilitative and fit for purpose
- practitioners are highly skilled and well supported
- individuals are effectively engaged and have positive working relationships with the practitioners

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS PERFORMANCE?
- Highly skilled, flexible practitioners
- Strong support, training and supervision for staff
- A common focus on the wellbeing of children
- The availability of a range of models provided in a flexible manner and in response to the context
- Cross-disciplinary practice and collaboration
- A history of strong clinical leadership, a focus on clinical needs in decision-making and the availability of high-quality training

ARE UNITING’S COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION SERVICES ALIGNED TO NEED?
- Some services are limited by funding (e.g., some programs are only funded in some locations).
- As indicated, there is potential to engage a wider diversity of families.

ARE UNITING’S COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION SERVICES OPERATING COST-EFFECTIVELY?
- As a consequence of shifting research priorities, minimal data was collected to address this question.
- The time and effort needed to engage marginalised families and those facing complex challenges mean that extra resources are needed for this work than for families who simply come through the door.

ARE OUTCOMES SIGNIFICANTLY BETTER FOR PARTICULAR CLIENTS, AND IF SO WHY?
- While the response rate for the client survey was too low to make definitive statements, there is evidence that outcomes do vary for different clients.
- Males were less satisfied and had lower perceptions of service outcome than females, and staff reported challenges in engaging and working with men:
  - Contributing factors include a perception by men that the family law system favours women, the gender balance of staff and expectations of men in relation to outcomes (e.g., if they expect 50:50 care, they may be dissatisfied if, in the interests of the child, this does not happen).
  - Domestic violence adds complexity of mediation and counselling and, as men are more likely to be perpetrators, engagement is more difficult and there are expectations of changes in behaviour.
- Families from diverse backgrounds (including cultural, sexuality and people with disabilities) appear to be underrepresented.
- Contributing factors include the Western nature of practice models and difficulties engaging families.
WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES AND ENABLERS (INCLUDING STRUCTURAL, SYSTEMIC AND PRACTICE) IN THE MEASUREMENT OF EFFECT/OUTCOMES FOR CLIENTS OF COUNSELLING

- Challenges to the measurement of client outcomes exist across client, practice and organisational contexts.
- For clients, these include creating brief tools that will be completed by clients and that consider gender, culture, sexuality, ability and context across factors of access, participation, engagement and success.
- Perceptions of services and outcomes are influenced by external factors beyond Uniting’s control (e.g., men who feel the family law system favours women).
- There are differing views within the organisation and the sector about the types of measures that should be used (e.g., some staff prioritise measures that are quantitative, validated and objective, and that do not rely on self-reporting, while others advocate for more qualitative measures that reflect people’s individual experience and recognise the broad range of potential outcomes).
- Challenges identified by staff include deciding what to measure, how to measure aspects like emotional intelligence, the variety of services/processes and potential outcomes, limitations of self-reporting and the subjective nature of many outcomes.
- Staff suggested that following up with clients to explore longer-term effects may be difficult, partly because families typically use the services at a particularly difficult time in their lives and may not want to revisit the experience. The client survey had a low response rate (10%), despite numerous reminders.
- Outcomes measures ideally reference the complexity of the client’s presenting circumstances (and hence contextualise the change achieved), as well as the client’s expectations and identified needs.
- An outcome measurement that does not reference client circumstance as a baseline for change will be at risk of observer bias and client dissatisfaction.
- The collaborative approach that Uniting has taken with its staff to foster a culture of outcomes-focused practice holds considerable promise, especially if this extends to, and includes, the voice of clients. Collaborative design and the development of inclusive and responsive outcomes measures are likely to maximise their effectiveness.

WHAT CHANGES COULD BE MADE TO IMPROVE THE MEASUREMENT OF EFFECT/OUTCOMES BY UNITING’S COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION SERVICES?

- Uniting has made considerable progress towards the design and development of an outcome measurement framework that staff feel is meaningful to their work.
- Considerations include the capacity of the organisation to be responsive to the variety of challenges identified above within funding requirements.
- Potential future directions for survey measures are noted in the discussion of the online survey.
- Consideration could be given to including client perspectives in baseline assessments and goal setting.
- Consideration could also be given to including client perspectives in the future design of outcomes measures tools in order to increase their accessibility, use and usefulness to practice.

RELATED TO RESEARCH QUESTION 3:
How can counselling and mediation services measure the impact/outcomes of their services?

UNITING HAS UNDERTAKEN extensive collaborative work with staff to build a shared understanding of the intended outcomes of the services delivered and how these are best operationalised and measured.

THIS COLLABORATIVE WORK has the potential to maximise the value of outcome measurement for Uniting by informing continuous quality improvement, responding to funding requirements and demonstrating the value of service innovations for sector leadership and future funding.
REFERENCES


REFERENCES


BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES FOR POST-SEPARATION COUNSELLING AND MEDIATION