

# Understanding family perspectives of school attendance in remote communities

**EVALUATION OF THE REMOTE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE STRATEGY**

**FEBRUARY 2018**

## Understanding family perspectives of school attendance in remote communities

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Winangali/Ipsos consortium acknowledges the traditional owners of the water, land and sea. Accumulated knowledge which encompasses spiritual relationships, relationships between people, relationships with the natural environment and the sustainable use of natural resources are reflected in language, narratives, social organisation, values, beliefs, and cultural laws and customs may have been shared with us by the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and/or communities that contributed to this research. We respect that this knowledge is not static like the written word but responds to change through absorbing new information and adapting to its implications. Therefore, we wish to acknowledge Indigenous communities as joint custodians of their research findings. Several Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people worked hard in their communities to make this research and report happen.

## Focus of this report

The evaluation deliberately concentrates on the interplay between parents/carers and RSAS – and what effect this has on getting children to attend school. The rationale for concentrating on parents/carers is twofold. Firstly, the existing knowledge and academic literature on school attendance shows that they have the greatest influence on getting children to school. The second reason is that this evaluation builds upon the 2015 Remote School Attendance Strategy Interim Progress Report, and the associated case study findings released in 2016, which primarily researched schools and service providers. This report builds from previous research and evaluation to better understand the complexities of remote school attendance.

## How to read this report

This is an aggregate report of our findings from five individual remote communities. Individual analysis of communities has not been done because the evaluation's purpose is to speak to service delivery improvements at a policy (and not community) level. It therefore needs to speak to a level of abstraction that is broad enough to enact policy change across RSAS and specific enough that learnings can be applied at a community level where certain contexts exist. Furthermore, we can protect the anonymity of those community residents that chose to speak to us. This is particularly important for remote Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities, as individuals are sometimes easily identifiable in such small populations.

## Limitations

Qualitative discussions are subjective and diverse, from a small number of storytellers who were not randomly selected therefore prevalence of outcome behaviours was not measured or explained by school attendance data. Further, this report has not attempted to quantify how common shared experiences or beliefs about school and attendance are, nor the prevalence of each of the family groups. The prevalence of particular beliefs or experiences will vary between communities, where some communities may have many people feeling the same because they experience a similar local context, while in other communities it may vary across the community.

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# Executive Summary

## Project objectives

The broad goals of this report are to gain a better understanding of parents' and carers' behavioural motivation in relation to education, and to what extent attitudes and beliefs impact on school attendance in remote Indigenous Communities. It also aims to identify how individual families engage with and respond to the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS). This will provide insights into how RSAS and services can better tailor support for people in different contexts, or at different times in their lives.

RSAS does not operate in isolation. It works alongside schools, other services and communities. These in turn all interact with families and influence their choices about school attendance. Every community is different and each have their own programs, government policies, schools and services all influencing education outcomes. This report focuses on parents' and carers' perspectives of the factors and drivers that influence choices about education.

This work builds on the *Remote School Attendance Strategy – Interim Progress Report (2015)* and *Case Study Research for the Remote School Attendance Strategy (2016)*. As such, it did not include interviews with school staff and other service providers (including RSAS), which was the focus of previous research.

## Method

The research was conducted by Winangali, an Indigenous owned organisation, in partnership with Ipsos.

This research used a realist-informed approach<sup>1</sup> to determine what works in which circumstances for which people, rather than simply looking at if RSAS was working or not. To facilitate this, a qualitative research approach to data collection was undertaken, including 114 semi-structured interviews with parent/carers and group discussions with parents, carers, local community members and RSAS staff. Fieldwork was undertaken from May 2017 to October 2017. Research took place in five remote communities across the Northern Territory, Queensland and South Australia.

The fieldwork included employing local community researchers to undertake interviews in most sites with experienced Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander researchers overseeing fieldwork in each site.

## Key findings

A one-size-fits all approach is unlikely to be effective in improving school attendance in remote communities. The research identified four different family types, each requiring specific supports from RSAS, the school, service providers and the community to help address barriers that make it difficult for them to send their children to school.

Every family interviewed was unique and their stories diverse, but this research identifies some patterns across families who said and did similar things. This research identified four broad family types each with a different predisposition toward getting their children to school. These family types do not explain the full circumstances of every family at all times, but group together families with similar values and needs in relation to school attendance. The family types are:

- **'Committed Families'** who spoke about the importance of education and supporting long term goals for their children. These families viewed school as a stepping stone to achieving their goals for university or jobs. Committed Families are supportive of education, but occasionally need practical support to help them get their children to school.

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<sup>1</sup> A realist approach recognises that different people (or different types of people) may respond to the same activity in different ways, depending on their individual circumstances. Therefore, to improve school attendance it is important to understand there are different contexts and different families who will need, perceive and respond to the help and support of programs like RSAS very differently.

- **‘Protective Families’**: who spoke about the importance of keeping kids safe from things that they thought were harmful. These families often worried that school (or the trip to and from school) might be unsafe and so protected their children by keeping them home. Protective Families want their children to attend school, but need lots of assurances that their children will be safe at school and when travelling to and from school.
- **‘Unsure Families’**: who spoke about the importance of a traditional way of life for the wellbeing of their children and community. These families were often unsure whether education would lead to a job, and did not think school would teach or value their culture. Unsure Families need role models to show the importance of education. It is also important their school employs Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, shows respect for culture and promotes cultural activities at school.
- **‘Disconnected Families’**: who spoke about how they felt isolated and alone. They said they did not know many people in their community and they did not want to be a bother or cause any conflict, so kept to themselves. These families wanted their children to go to school, but did not always know how to do it or who to ask for help. Disconnected Families are, at times, socially isolated and may need more social support and help them engage with the community and other services to support school attendance.

In addition to these four family types, many families can also experience difficult times - **Complex Life Events**. This can include things that may change over time such as, substance abuse, loss of loved ones, financial difficulties, family problems, physical or mental health conditions, homelessness or domestic violence. Families experiencing Complex Life Events may require a range of support services from different providers with specialised skills.

This research found that many parents believed that when acting in isolation RSAS is unable to improve school attendance for families experiencing Complex Life Events. When it worked best, RSAS was an effective referral and coordination point, but only when staff were appropriately trained, knowledgeable about other services, and were seen as ‘the right person for the job’. When families experience Complex Life Events dismissing their broader concerns or insisting families only focus on getting children to school can be counterproductive. During these times, families may feel overwhelmed and may not be in a position to focus on school.

### **Strengths and motivations of attendance for different family types**

Each of the family types demonstrated key strengths that, when supported, can enable them to get their children to school. RSAS can build on these strengths by recognising that different family types have different needs and by adapting their support strategies accordingly. This includes recognising that different things can motivate or demotivate different family types.

**‘Committed Families’** have aspirations, goals and pride that can be supported by offering practical support so they can get their children to school. It is important to not over service, shame or exclude them, but rather let say what they need and how they want to be engaged. These families are motivated by:

- setting clear expectations about the purpose and delivery of RSAS services and asking the family which types of support they wish to utilise;
- building positive relationships with the whole family, even if there are no attendance issues identified;
- providing friendly occasional updates or reminders about the value of regular attendance; and
- developing close working relationships between the school, RSAS, other service providers and the community.

**‘Protective Families’** want to keep their children safe and can be supported by demonstrating safety at school, and on the way to and from school. It is important not to dismiss their fears, force them to use services they are not comfortable with and focusing only on their fears and not their strengths. These families are motivated by:

- listening to their concerns and making sure these concerns are addressed;
- helping parents to address and reduce their fears;
- offering fun activities for children and inviting parents to see their children having fun;
- encouraging the school and community to adopt anti-bullying strategies.



**‘Unsure Families’** strongly value traditional education and culture is particularly important to them and can be supported by ensuring cultural safety for their children. It is important not to dismiss their values or beliefs or exclude them from designing local attendance strategies. These families are motivated by:

- demonstrating that children can have both a strong cultural education and formal schooling, and families do not have to choose between one or the other;
- employing RSAS and school staff that have a good cultural or social ‘fit’;
- linking them with role models from the community, who can demonstrate the benefits of education; and
- using positive engagement skills to build respect, trust and rapport with families.

**‘Disconnected Families’** believe education is important for their children. They can be supported by helping them overcome social and physical isolation. This makes it easier for them to send their children to school. It is important not to overlook them as they are unlikely to seek out help on their own, and they will need to feel trust before they talk about their issues. These families are best motivated by:

- offering a service that considers their needs which may differ from others in the community;
- assisting in reducing physical barriers, particularly if they are isolated and live out of town;
- talking about what services are available and how they can be accessed;
- introducing them to teachers, service providers and other people in the community; and
- being open, friendly and answering any questions they may have.

### **Common responses to RSAS across family types**

The research has shown that different types of families respond to the same activity in different ways. However, researchers also found that there were six common enablers and barriers.

- Families are more likely to engage with RSAS staff who are the right cultural fit;
- Families will avoid using RSAS services if the ‘wrong person’ is in the job;
- Families feel RSAS is only effective when invited ‘inside the gate’ of people’s homes or the school;
- Safety matters, and families will protect their children from harm (real or perceived);
- Norms matter and family’s attendance behaviours will be impacted by peer behaviour; and
- Families respond to rewards and incentives – when they are done right.

### **Conclusion**

The families in this study demonstrated key strengths that can be supported to help get their children to school. RSAS can work to families’ strengths by reinforcing positive attitudes and norms, advocating for cultural safety and anti-bullying, and creating a sense of belonging for families that want their children to be happy, safe, and strong at school

Some of the families interviewed felt that they experienced good support from RSAS staff and some did not. Families’ experiences of RSAS were sometimes linked to service delivery quality (for example, if the bus service was reliable and on time) or other systems (for example, if they felt the school was culturally safe). However, even when RSAS services were being delivered consistently and to a high standard, not all families responded to RSAS activities by sending their children to school every day. Families’ choices about school attendance were influenced by their predispositions, and the resources applied through RSAS were not always sufficient or sufficiently targeted to meet the needs of all families. In short, RSAS supports some families better than others.



# 1. About the RSAS

In 2008, the Prime Minister, State Premiers and Chief Ministers agreed to six ambitious targets to address the disadvantage faced by Indigenous Australians in life expectancy, child mortality, education and employment. A new target was introduced in 2014 to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance within five years (by 2018). This new target recognised the fundamental importance of education in improving a range of social outcomes, and the long term negative impacts of low school attendance.

The management and delivery of schooling is the responsibility of state and territory governments. The Commonwealth's efforts, including the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS), are focused on early intervention, engaging with parents and encouraging school attendance to complement state and territory government efforts.

Started in Term 1 of 2014, RSAS works with remote communities to lift attendance in schools where attendance rates are often very low. It operates in 78 remote sites with a combined enrolment of approximately 14,500 students. In addition, it has created approximately 470 jobs for Indigenous people.

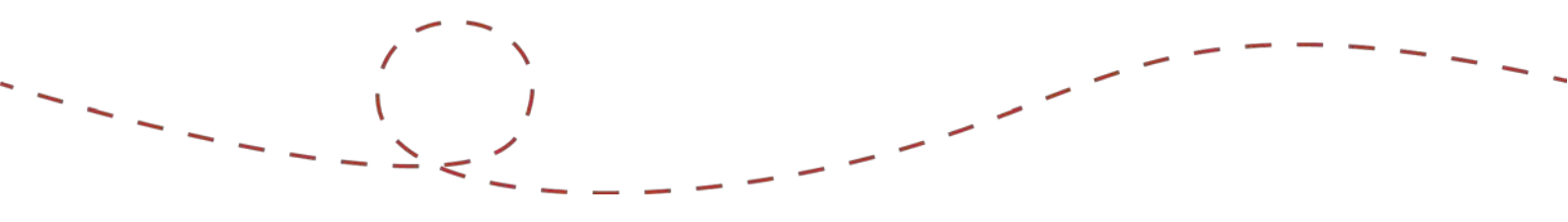
RSAS is a flexible, place-based strategy which employs local people to work with schools, families, parents and communities to ensure children are supported to attend school every day possible. It is delivered through a flexible model designed to best meet local needs, while operating within the national RSAS framework, sometimes referred to as the 'franchise model'. It is delivered through third party providers, community controlled organisations, non-government organisations and in some sites, also through schools.

A key aspect of RSAS is the employment of local people, who are engaged under the strategy to deliver core RSAS activities, as well as design and implement locally tailored initiatives. This is because local people are best placed to solve local problems. By using their knowledge and skills, RSAS teams can help empower communities to get kids to school.

In 2014 the RSAS model was focused on short term/immediate actions such as bus runs and door knocking – the practical issues. While these often remain an important aspect of RSAS, a broader focus is required to make sustained improvements to attendance rates.

In 2016, changes were made to the model to allow flexibility for providers to trial new approaches that may better suit local needs. RSAS teams undertake a range of activities to help boost attendance, including helping families to overcome issues which are barriers to attendance.

Activities vary depending on the needs and local context of each community, but may include: nutrition programs, follow-ups with non-attending students and their families, advice and information, rewards and recognition programs, locally developed strategies to support better education outcomes for mobile students and their families, and classroom support.





School attendance data (Figure 1) demonstrates that some of the RSAS elements have contributed to school attendance increasing initially. However, more recently school attendance has plateaued and school attendance is no longer increasing at the same rate. The elements that created the initial uplifts may have assisted a group of students to a certain extent, but may not work for everyone all the time. Therefore, better understanding of behaviour is needed to inform what elements are needed or what elements can be improved to increase school attendance.

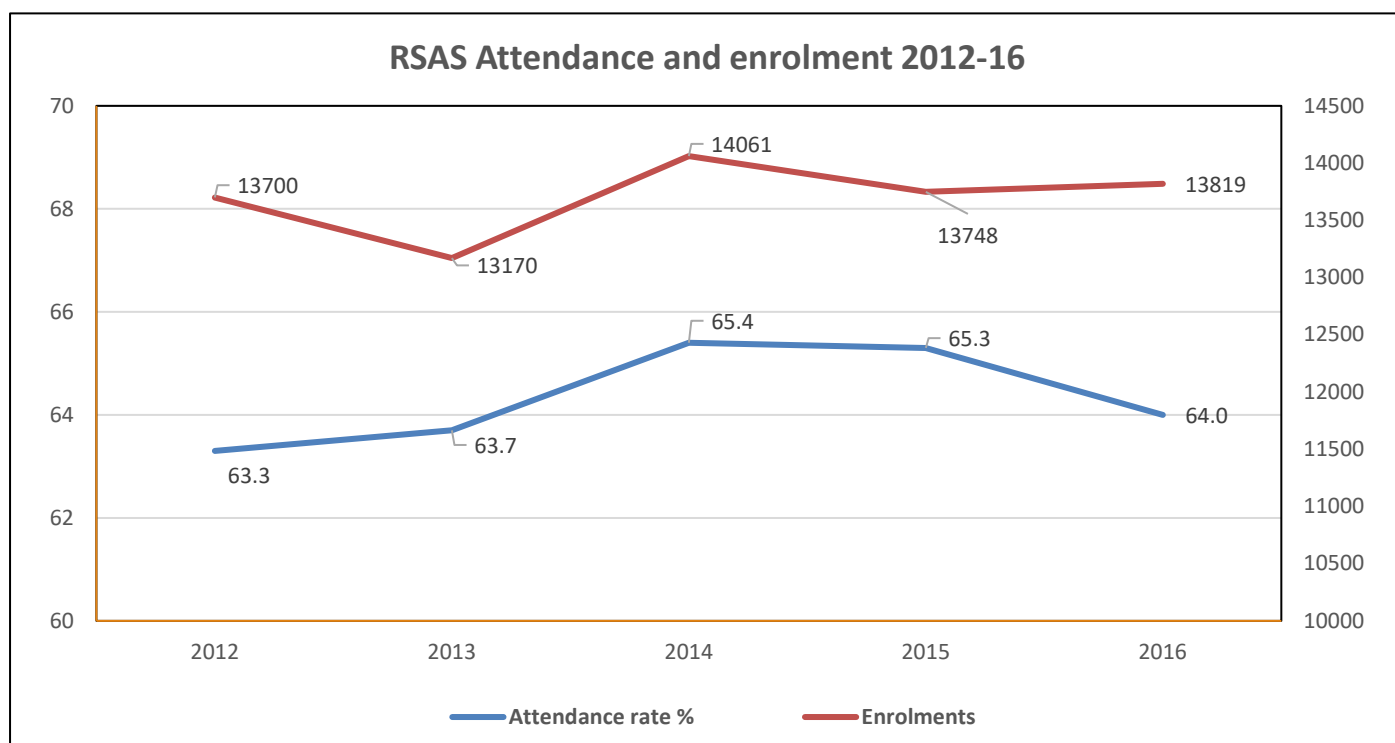


Figure 1: RSAS Attendance and enrolment for all RSAS Schools 2012-2016. Source: ACARA. \*\*Enrolment rates are the total of grades Preparatory/Transition to Grade 12 whereas attendance rates include only the compulsory years of Grades 1-10.

# 1. Research Overview

## 1.1 Purpose

This research set out to understand why RSAS is working in some circumstances, but not others. It examines the interplay between parents and carers and RSAS – and what effect this has on getting children to school. It uses a realist-informed approach that is not fully realist but which incorporates aspects of realist methods<sup>23</sup>. The rationale for concentrating on parents and carers is twofold. Firstly, the existing knowledge and academic literature on school attendance shows that they have the greatest influence on getting children to school.<sup>4</sup> As such, understanding how parents and carers relate to RSAS and school attendance more broadly, is critical to improving attendance outcomes. The second reason is that this evaluation builds upon existing knowledge from schools and service providers in the *2015 Remote School Attendance Strategy Interim Progress Report* and the *Case Study Research for the Remote School Attendance Strategy* released in 2016. This stage of research builds from previous work to examine how parents and carers have been supported by and influenced through RSAS.

The broad goals of this evaluation are to gain a better understanding about the attitudes and beliefs of families living in RSAS communities and to what extent these beliefs and attitudes may be acting as barriers to school attendance. This research also aims to identify how families have experienced RSAS, to assess and understand:

- under what circumstances RSAS can influence and improve school attendance for individuals
- if there are any individual or family circumstances for which RSAS is unable to support any increase in attendance
- for whom RSAS is working
- what the strengths and limitations of the current model are (including any unintended consequences)
- where and how supports could be better targeted to meet the needs of different types of families.

## 1.2 Methodology

Research took place in five remote communities across the Northern Territory, Queensland and South Australia. The methodology was designed in order to ensure the research was conducted by Indigenous researchers. Qualitative research was undertaken with a participatory approach and local adaption to methods for each community. The findings in this report are based on 114 in-depth interviews with parent/carers, ethnography and group discussions with parents, carers, local community members and RSAS staff. Fieldwork commenced in May 2017 and concluded in October 2017.

Prior to commencing the field work, initial theories were developed about how families respond to RSAS, by drawing from a range of sources, including existing literature (literature review at Appendix B), program data, anecdotal evidence collected while delivering RSAS and previous evaluations. Researchers theorised that RSAS was having different outcomes for different cohorts of people. A preposition was formed that RSAS had different outcomes for those facing different barriers to

<sup>2</sup> Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. (1997) *Realistic Evaluation* Sage

<sup>3</sup> Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. (1997) *Realistic Evaluation* Sage

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Wood, Lacy and Bauman, Emily (2017) How family, school, and community engagement can improve student achievement and influence school reform: literature review, NME Foundation; Altman, M., & Meis, A. (2013). Kininvolved: Utilizing technology to communicate, evaluate and advocate for improved attendance and family and community engagement. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 41(\$), 319-332; Murphy, Bill, and Debbie Pushor. 'Parent marginalization, marginalized parents: Creating a place for parents on the school landscape.' *Alberta Journal of Educational Research* 50.3 (2204): 221; Wang, M.T., & Sheikh-Khamil, S. (2014). Does parental involvement matter for student achievement and mental health in high school? *Child Development*, 85(2), 610-625

attendance, those who hold different beliefs about school and those who hold different beliefs about themselves and their ability to help their children succeed at school.

To develop a research plan that could incorporate a realist approach, a three-day training session was held with the research team including three experienced Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander researchers who would oversee fieldwork and train the locally recruited researchers (through a train the trainer model). At the workshop, the emerging theory was further refined, and key elements of the theory were chosen to be tested in this research, including:

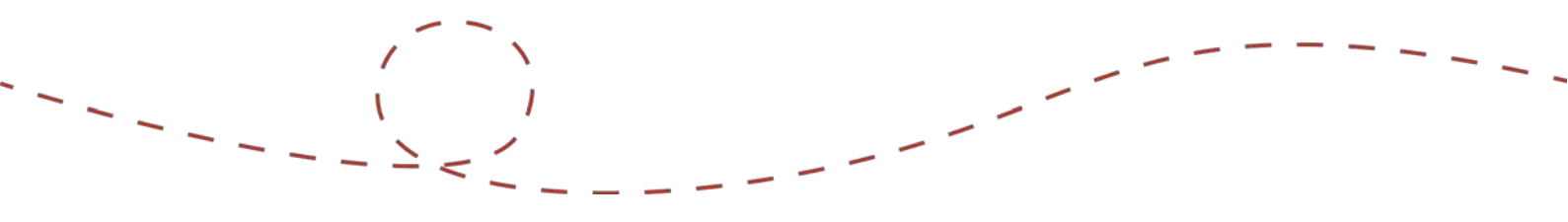
- if the individuals delivering RSAS have a significant impact on outcomes (i.e. the right person for the job is required)
- if parents' core beliefs about school more broadly impact how they view RSAS or make attendance decisions
- if some elements of RSAS work better than others for different types of parents
- if rewards and incentives impact attendance decisions, and if so, which rewards
- if there are some families whose needs are beyond the ability of RSAS to assist, due to the complexity of their needs.

A set of guiding realist interview questions were designed to test these theories with parents and carers of RSAS students. The questions were designed to better understand how parents and carers perceived themselves, their communities, school, education and the RSAS service. This is because it is important to understand how different people perceive and interact with the world around them, when trying to understand people's behavior and choices. This is true for children, parent/carers, RSAS staff and other service providers. There is no objective understanding or classification of any community, school or RSAS service. Parents' and carers' perceptions of their physical and social environments are what define the community, school and RSAS service contexts for them. Similarly, it is their description of themselves and their motivations and abilities that define their family contexts. As such, the researchers undertaking this project developed a set of guiding interview questions, to gain an in-depth understanding of how participants viewed themselves in relation to RSAS.

The research questions and accompanying diagrams (at Appendix C and D) were used to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews with research participants from five remote communities. The interview questions were designed to be iterative and develop over the course of the project. The exploratory research looked for evidence of causal links and once patterns emerged, built from previous responses to develop a deeper understanding of why certain activities triggered certain reactions for different types of people. Interviews were constructed to collect the particular information that parents have, and thereby to refute or refine theories about how and for whom the program 'works'.

The five communities were chosen to build off the earlier RSAS case study research conducted in 2015-16. This research involved interviews with school attendance supervisors, school attendance officers, school principals, PMC network staff and RSAS providers. For research continuity, and to build from the findings in the original evaluation, this research returned to a selection of the same communities, this time focusing on parents' and carers' beliefs and attitudes towards school attendance. An additional community was also included that was not previously studied. This enabled researchers to examine a stronger performing RSAS site, to better understand what elements work in some contexts. To determine if these sites were appropriate, they were assessed against a range of factors:

- There are no known issues with RSAS provider performance and RSAS is being implemented in accordance with the policy framework.
- Sites have access to appropriate support services available for participants if needed (for example, counselling). Interpreters are also available, if needed.
- There are no foreseeable concerns with the proposed timing of research (i.e. planned Cultural Business – noting that there may be unplanned events which should be considered as they arise).



When conducting fieldwork, Winangali, an Indigenous owned organisation, in partnership with Ipsos, aimed to have one experienced Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander researcher and two local community researchers (male and female) undertaking interviews, although this was not possible in all sites. Local researchers were engaged in discussions with participating communities. Participating communities helped identify local researchers who would be appropriate to interview local families. These local researchers were then trained in a realist interviewing style by the experienced Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander researchers overseeing fieldwork in each site. Local researchers then interviewed a range of parents and carers of RSAS students in the five communities (114 interviews in total were conducted), to better understand how families interacted with RSAS activities and school attendance more broadly.

Following the fieldwork, lead researchers participated in a teleconference workshop with local researchers who conducted fieldwork. The workshop was used to identify the key themes, issues, patterns and points of contention that arose during the fieldwork. This participatory research method was employed to: ensure research was culturally appropriate; generate professional capacity in participating communities; and increase the sustainability of project goals beyond funded timeframes. This process of immersion in the data also helped researchers to isolate key themes, points of view, trends and patterns in what participants said. It involved multiple team members independently analysing the same material, ensuring that the resulting analyses were robust and not subjective and able to withstand critical scrutiny.

Following the teleconference workshop, interview responses were analysed using the Motivation, Ability Physical and Social (MAPS) framework (see Appendix E), to understand how school attendance behaviours are influenced for families in different circumstances. MAPS is a systematic approach to understanding behaviour – Motivation, Ability, Physical and Social. It is used to analyse behavioural issues and design effective behaviour change interactions. MAPS is a way to be systematic and leave no stone unturned when trying to identify all the possible contextual factors of behaviour.

MOTIVATION	ABILITY	PHYSICAL	SOCIAL
<b>What activates them to do it?</b> Reflective or automatic mechanisms such as attitudes, intentions, habit, desire, learning (experiences, associations, emotion) and instinct.	<b>What enables them to do it?</b> People often lack the knowledge to make decisions and change behaviour or the basic skills or ability to change.	<b>Does the environment support it?</b> Includes the actual environment in which we find people in.	<b>Does the social setting influence it?</b> Includes the culture that the individual was educated or lives in, and the people and institutions with whom they interact.

Researchers analysed the results of the 114 interviews to determine what motivational forces were contributing to family decision-making. This analysis showed that RSAS activities do not work in the same way for all families. Each family's decisions about school attendance are influenced by a range of internal factors (Motivation and Ability) and external factors (Physical and Social environment). The combination of these factors make up a family's context. MAPS was then used to conduct a qualitative segmentation, where identified contexts were then clustered into four family 'types' and a set of circumstances.

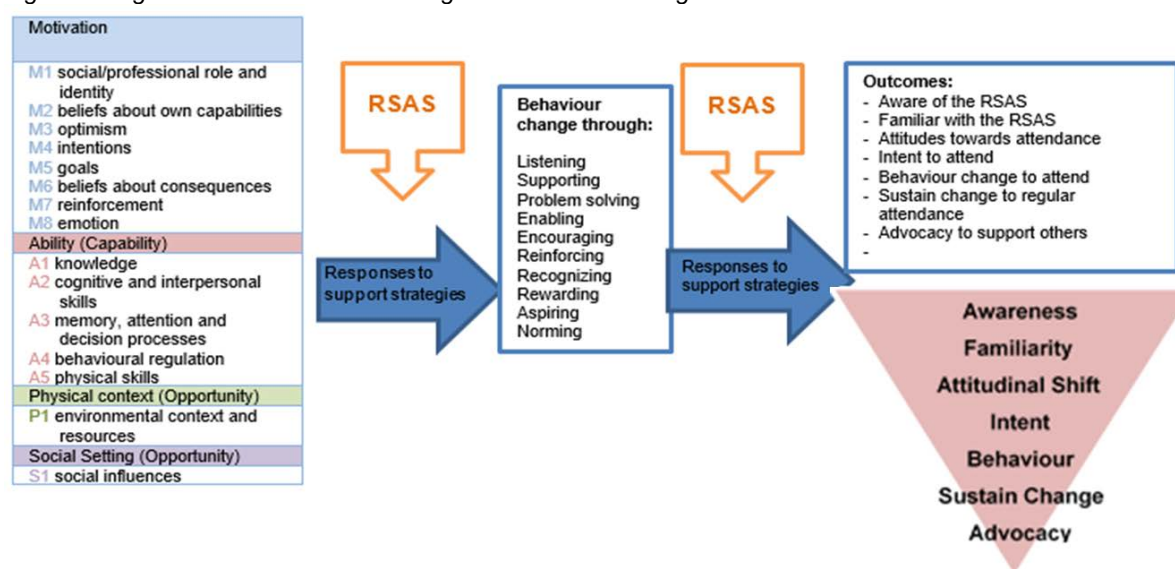
Researchers then examined the set of resources applied by RSAS (these resources are family follow-up visits by RSAS staff, referrals to specialist support, bus services, incentives and other activities) and how these resources interplay with different families in different contexts. Each family had varying existing predispositions toward school attendance. Researchers then examined how existing predispositions (motivation) were influenced by different RSAS resources for different family types.

In Figure 2, the diagram shows all the sources of behaviour that make up the predispositions of families under the MAPS framework (far left). When the RSAS activities are applied (orange boxes), families respond to these resources and they make a choice about their behaviour or they behave without thinking at times. This results in a behavioural change occurring (middle blue box) which then interacts with the RSAS activities which are applied (orange boxes) and produces an outcome (far right box). There may be several iterations of these intersections of activities and behavioural outcomes over time and change may occur



incrementally, depending on the parent/carer disposition. The incremental changes over time may be considered using a stages of behaviour change model<sup>5</sup> of moving from awareness to familiarity to attitudinal shifts to intending to change, actual behaviour change, sustaining that change and advocating for the behaviour (upside down triangle).

Figure 2: Logic for RSAS behaviour change and outcomes using a MAPS framework and realist lens



This methodology was realist-informed, although a fully realist methodology could not be used. To be fully realist, the investigators would have analysed outcome patterns such as school attendance for different sub-groups of children, and considered all relevant aspects of context, including institutional (school) context and broader community dynamics and policy settings. In place of a fully realist approach, realist-informed qualitative research techniques were adapted to be safely undertaken in a culturally appropriate manner. Applying a realist informed world view (or ontology) in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander setting has a number of important theoretical and methodological challenges. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers who conducted this work consider that a realist approach has implications for how we conceptualise meaning and culture, causation, and diversity<sup>6</sup>. However, realist approaches do support a strengths-based approach. Realist approaches do not consider that interventions 'change' people, and do not regard those receiving them as passive recipients of services. The volition of participants is key to realist approaches, and the reasoning they apply to the resources that interventions provide is what is considered to generate outcomes. A realist approach also considers the diversity and complexity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, allowing their stories to be contextualised. A realist approach assumes that no program 'works' all the time for everyone. A realist approach allows the conversation to be about 'why it does work for some people to some extent', rather than simply about whether it is or is not working.

<sup>5</sup> Transtheoretical Model uses stages of change to integrate the most powerful principles and processes of change to conceptualise the process of intentional behaviour change where people move through a series of stages when modifying behaviour.

<sup>6</sup> An international group of Indigenous stakeholders agreed in October 2016 to discuss these issues further, and their findings will be published when available, probably in 2019.

## 2. Findings: Family perspectives of school attendance

### 2.1 Overview of Key Findings

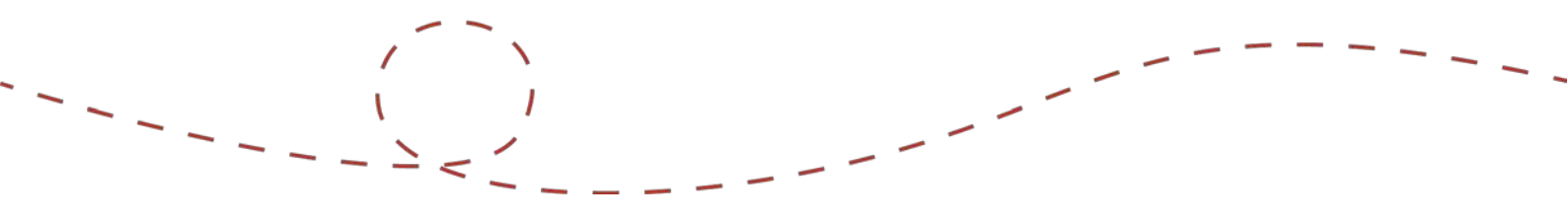
The research found that there were many different families whose propensity to get children to school varied. However, by using a qualitative segmentation and Ipsos MAPS framework (detailed explanation included in Appendix E) families living in remote communities and their relationship to school attendance could be broadly clustered into four family types and one set of life circumstances.

The four family types are broad, each with different experiences and distinct perspectives of RSAS, school, education and their engagement with community. They include:

- Families who spoke a lot about the importance of education and supporting long-term goals for their children. These families viewed school as a stepping stone to achieving their goals. In this report, we have called these families '**Committed Families**'. Committed Families are pro-education, but occasionally need practical support to help them get their children to school.
- Families who spoke a lot about the importance of keeping kids safe from things they thought were harmful. These families often feared school (or the trip to school) might be unsafe and so protected their children by keeping them home from school. We called these families '**Protective Families**.' Protective families would like their children to attend school, but need assurances their children will be safe at school and travelling to and from school.
- Families spoke about the importance of traditional ways of life for the wellbeing of their children and community. These families were often unsure education would lead to a job, and did not think school would teach or value culture. We called these families '**Unsure Families**'. Unsure Families need role models to convince them of the importance of education. They also need their school to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and show respect for culture and promote culture at school.
- Families who told us they felt isolated and alone. They said they did not know many people in their community and they did not want to be a bother or cause any conflict by doing the wrong thing. These families wanted their children to go to school, but did not always know how to do it or who to ask for help. We called these families '**Disconnected Families**'. Disconnected Families are socially isolated and need more social support and help to engage with the community and other services to help get their children to school.

In addition to these four main family types, researchers observed that many families can also occasionally experience difficult times and experience **Complex Life Events**, which impact on school attendance. Complex Life Events can be things like substance abuse, homelessness or domestic violence. Families experiencing Complex Life Events require a range of interventions from different service providers. The co-morbidity of some experiences makes supporting some families very complex. The ongoing nature of some experiences makes supporting some families very complex. Some families may always be in need of support depending on the extent of the Complex Life Events. This research found that many parents believed that RSAS was unable to support and increase school attendance for families experiencing Complex Life Events, unless these families had access to specialist support services. When it worked best, RSAS was an effective referral and coordination point for these families, but only when staff were appropriately trained, and were also seen by families as 'the right person for the job'. When RSAS staff were seen to be harsh, or critical of families experiencing Complex Life Events, these families were less likely to send their children to school.

All the four family types can sometimes experience Complex Life Events – some families may experience these occasionally, others more regularly or almost always and some may never experience them. Due to the difficult nature of these events, parent/carers who are experiencing these events often lack the capacity





to get their children to school and specialist support interventions are required to assist them to address complex issues. They require additional support to enable them to access the practical support of RSAS and get their children to school (e.g. address anti-social problems, financial difficulties, family problems, child behaviour, physical and mental health, overcrowding). The below table provides some representative statements made by research participants in each of the family types. Underneath each set of statements is a descriptive summary of each family type. These descriptions are sorted under the four MAPS headings of Motivation, Ability, Physical Environment and Social Environment.

Table 1: Contextual factors determining pre-disposition to school attendance

Family types	Motivation Factors	Ability Factors	Physical Environment Factors	Social Environment Factors
<b>Committed Families</b>	<p>I encourage my children to go to school and see the benefits of going to school regularly.</p> <p>I think my children will go to school more if they get awards and prizes for doing so.</p> <p>I understand how to access services and get my kids to school, and see the benefits of using services.</p>	<p>I am confident I can get my children to school because they are healthy and rested enough.</p> <p>I know how to access services if I need any help getting my children to school.</p>	<p>I am not afraid that my children will be physically harmed, bullied and teased and so do not fear them going to school.</p> <p>I occasionally need a reliable bus service to get my kids to school.</p>	<p>I see that my children like going to school because they can spend time with their friends there.</p> <p>I know I am a good parent for getting my kids to school because others I respect validate my actions.</p>
	<p>Committed Families believe education is an important part of life, will make a difference in their children's lives and is something they are motivated to try and accomplish.</p>	<p>Committed Families understand what services are available and know how to access them. They are confident in their parenting abilities, and believe they can influence their children's behaviour relating to school attendance.</p>	<p>Committed Families, for the most part, can get their children to school themselves, or with friends and family support. At times, they may need to use services (such as a daily bus). They do not fear their children will be mentally or physically abused on route to school or while at school.</p>	<p>For Committed Families the family and community network creates a culture where going to school is expected, worthwhile and valuable.</p>

Family types	Motivation Factors	Ability Factors	Physical Environment Factors	Social Environment Factors
<b>Protective Families</b>	<p>I fear my child will be bullied or teased at school, or en route to school.</p> <p>I don't trust services or the school to keep them mentally or physically safe.</p>	<p>I am confident I can get my children to school because they are healthy and rested enough.</p> <p>I know how to access services if I need any help getting my children to school. However, I don't trust services or the school to keep my children safe.</p>	<p>I believe the school is not addressing bullying.</p> <p>I think the school is not working collaboratively with the community to make a safe learning environment.</p> <p>I think services are not working collaboratively with the community to make them safe.</p> <p>I do not have a safe way to get my children to school, even if I believe they will be safe at school.</p>	<p>I see my children are negatively influenced by other children to not go to school.</p> <p>I take advice if it comes from cultural authority or a family member that I respect (if they are the right age, clan and gender to work with me and my children). I don't take advice from just anyone.</p>
	<p>Protective Families believe education is important but their previous experiences leave them concerned about sending their children to school.</p>	<p>Children of Protective Families are healthy and well-rested. Given their fears for their children's well-being, families are unsure about accessing services for help, and will need strong assurances their children will be safe always, including at school and on the way to school. .</p>	<p>The physical environment of the community, school, classroom or travel between home and school scares Protective Families because they do not believe their children are safe.</p>	<p>Children of Protective Families are sometimes being negatively influenced by others to not attend school. Protective families do not have support and/or encouragement from friends, family or credible source that can reduce their fears. If their fears are not addressed, or are dismissed, Protective Families will not send their children to school.</p>
<b>Unsure Families</b>	<p>I do not think that school will lead to much and I do not value modern education.</p> <p>I only value modern education if children are also learning traditional education.</p> <p>I do not think education will lead to a job.</p> <p>My values for culture are not aligned with school values.</p>	<p>Unless I am away from community, I could get my children to school because they are healthy and rested enough.</p> <p>I know how to access services if I need any help getting my children to school.</p>	<p>I believe the school is not culturally relevant, incorporating traditional education or employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.</p> <p>I think the school is not working collaboratively with the community to make a culturally appropriate learning environment.</p> <p>I think services are not working collaboratively with the community to make them culturally appropriate.</p>	<p>I see most of the other children do not go to school.</p> <p>I see most children who get an education do not get a job.</p> <p>I see most adults without a job or an` education.</p> <p>I don't see many job opportunities in my community for local people.</p> <p>I see cultural activities and practices as the most meaningful part of my community.</p>



Family types	Motivation Factors	Ability Factors	Physical Environment Factors	Social Environment Factors
	<p>Unsure Families do not believe the way education is currently offered in their community is important or relevant, they do not think school will make a difference in their children's lives as it will not lead to a job. It also may not operate in a way that accommodates for their beliefs of what the future should hold.</p>	<p>Unsure Families understand what services are available and know how to access them. But they believe the school (or the services) are not culturally appropriate, or beneficial for their children's long-term wellbeing.</p>	<p>Unsure Families do not think the school environment supports the kind of educational values they hold, and may even view it as a threat to culture. They can get their children to school, but think school is not capable of offering their children appropriate learning opportunities.</p>	<p>Family and social networks of Unsure Families do not see the importance of school. Unsure Families do not have role models demonstrating its value. If the school (or services) does not actively show respect for culture it is unlikely Unsure Families will send children to school and if school is a threat to culture, Unsure Families will not send their children to school.</p>
<b>Disconnected Families</b>	<p>I am fearful of conflict in this community and try to avoid trouble.</p> <p>I believe my children will be safer if they stay with me and my family group.</p> <p>I do not feel part of this community.</p> <p>I feel alone when it comes to solving problems about my children.</p> <p>I fear my children will be peer pressured into anti-social behaviour.</p>	<p>I don't know how the school operates.</p> <p>I don't know how services operate or who runs them.</p> <p>I am confused, unaware or disengaged with support services and its purpose.</p> <p>I don't feel confident I can get my children to school, and I don't know who to ask for help.</p>	<p>I think support services find it hard to work with my family.</p> <p>I do not think support services and school staff are culturally appropriate for me (typically due to cultural position, gender, age or character).</p> <p>I live far from the school, and I do not know how to access a bus service or there is no bus service offered for my children.</p>	<p>I do not do what most people do in this community.</p> <p>I don't take advice from people who do not have cultural authority, and are not the right age, clan and gender to work with me and my children.</p> <p>I do not have extended family or many friends here who can help me.</p> <p>I am not part of the larger clan groups or I am from outside the community.</p>
	<p>Disconnected Families are not motivated to get their children to school because their circumstances keep them apart from the community.</p>	<p>Disconnected Families are not embedded in the community and so are unsure what services are available, who they are for, or how to access them. They don't feel confident to ask for help or to reach out.</p>	<p>Disconnected Families may be physically isolated, which makes getting children to school difficult.</p>	<p>Disconnected Families do not have social support and/or encouragement from friends, families or others to help them get their children to school. If they are not able to be supported to feel more socially included, they will be unlikely to send their children to school.</p>

	Motivation Factors	Ability Factors	Physical Environment Factors	Social Environment Factors
<b>Complex Life Events</b>	<p>I am aware that I have problems in the home but do not know how I can get help or who to trust to help me.</p> <p>I feel shame and do not always like to talk about my problems to others.</p> <p>I am overwhelmed by everything in my life and cannot consider sending my children to school amongst everything else happening.</p>	<p>I can't get my children to school because they are unhealthy, tired, or have behavioural problems.</p> <p>I don't have the skills to talk to the school about my social problems or children's problems.</p> <p>It is hard to get my children to bed on time.</p> <p>There are too many things stopping me from getting my children to school.</p>	<p>There are a lot of worries in our family like overcrowding in our house, poverty, substance abuse, family violence, mental health and physical health issues.</p> <p>There are no services that can help with my social issues in this community.</p>	<p>I see my children are negatively influenced by other children to not go to school.</p> <p>I take advice if it comes from cultural authority or a family member I respect that are the right age, clan and gender to work with me and my children – if I believe they genuinely want to help me and my children.</p> <p>I will not take advice from just anyone, and if someone yells at me or shames me, I will withdraw further.</p>
	Families experiencing Complex Life Events are often not able to send their children to school, as their circumstances impact their capacity and capability to do so.	Families experiencing Complex Life Events do not understand how to access services and haven't got the physical or psychological capacity to get children to school. They need to address these barriers before they can address school attendance.	Families experiencing Complex Life Events do not have the appropriate physical context to get their children to school, this can be broad ranging, from having clean clothes to a bed to sleep in, or food to eat. They have few resources, which make the school attendance difficult.	Families experiencing Complex Life Events do not have the cultural, community, family or other social support that they need to make going to school normal or possible.

*\* While the Complex Life Events circumstance category is not a family type, it is worth including it in this table to better explain the context of life that families here find themselves within.*

While we can broadly cluster families into these four family types and one set of circumstances, it is important to understand that all families are unique with a completely different set of contexts. These family types are not mutually exclusive or exhaustive. Families can shift between different family types at different times in their lives, and they can also have characteristics from more than one family type. The purpose of segmentation is not to categorise families into definitive and immovable types. Rather it helps describe the barriers and enablers to attendance that some families have in common. Understanding how different families may respond to different activities can help policymakers to better tailor support, targeting families in different contexts or at different times in their lives.

Further, because the environment (and the families within it) are continually changing, RSAS must operate across a complex system. School attendance programs by their very nature must interact with several other such systems like community programs, government policies, schools and services. These systems all interact with families and influence decisions they will make about school attendance. Therefore, to improve school attendance it is important to understand that there are different families who will need, perceive and react to the help and support of programs like RSAS differently. Each of the communities studied offered different types and levels of support to families to assist them to get their children to school. Some of the families interviewed felt that they experienced good support from RSAS staff and some did

not. This research found that families' experience of RSAS was sometimes linked to the quality of service delivery (for example, if the bus service was reliable and on time). However, even when services were being delivered consistently and to a high standard, not all families responded to RSAS by sending their children to school. Families' choices about school attendance were influenced by their broader contextual factors, and RSAS could support some family types better than others.

The research found that to get families engaging with the RSAS and/or children going to school, numerous support strategies are required when certain contextual factors are present. The support strategies needed are different for different families at different times in the lives, but at all times a critical mass is required. This means there must be enough enablers (i.e. existing motivation and additional supports) to counter balance any barriers (or demotivating beliefs, limited ability or barriers). If some positive contextual factors are already present in a family (for example, parents already value education because they can see that it will lead to a job), a strong RSAS can help to supplement and strengthen a family's resolve or ability to attend school. However, when the contextual factors are particularly negative (for example families with children who have behavioural problems) or families have multiple and complex needs, RSAS acting alone may not be able to get children to school, as specialised support is required. In these instances, RSAS worked best as a referral pathway, rather than a primary support option. Finally, if the wrong type of support is offered by RSAS for a family, it can have a negative impact on attendance. For example, if a family has struggled to buy food that week, and then a RSAS worker says something to make the family feel ashamed, they are less likely to engage with RSAS, other services or the school. As such, a critical factor for RSAS to improve school attendance is the ability of staff to recognise and respond to the different needs of families in different contexts, and at different times in their lives.

Finally, this research also found some elements of the RSAS which were effective for most families. For example, where RSAS provided encouragement to go to school, incentives, breakfasts or lunch, bus travel and cultural authority or social endorsement, it strengthened mechanisms of Committed Families and some Protective Families. In this family context, and in a community that supports education, RSAS simply makes life easier for students to attend school. It becomes a convenient, ordinary and stigma-free way to get children to school. It also makes it easier for those who are somewhat disposed to attending school, but may need additional support to make it habitual (because a full stomach, transport and social norms are present).

There were also a range of issues which all families identified would negatively impact their children's attendance, or their interaction with RSAS. This included activities where children and parents felt threatened, a lack of sufficient information or consultation to understand RSAS, service delivery issues (like the bus not including pickups for some locations), if families felt socially or culturally excluded them from the service, or when staff were not the right cultural fit to service some families.

In summary, some families respond differently to the same activities, depending on their context. Different families and their relationship with school attendance can be broadly considered in four types and one set of circumstances. In addition, there are a range of factors that can become enablers or barriers to attendance and engagement for all families. However, the extent to which certain factors became enablers or barriers varied between family types.

The later chapters of this report will explain how the four family types were identified, describe the four family types, provide an overview of the key enablers for each family type to strengthen families' predispositions (i.e. Motivation, Ability, Physical environment, Social Environment) to enable them to get their children to school. It will also examine what types of activities might become barriers for each of the family types and summarise a range of supporting and inhibiting activities that can support attendance for different family types.

## 2.2 Identifying the family types

This chapter explains how the four family types and one set of circumstances were identified, and briefly



describes each family type, in relationship to the contextual factors they discussed during their interview.

When examining participants' responses, researchers found there were significant differences in the families interviewed. However, it was observed that some families made similar statements about school, and their relationship with the complex schooling system. Researchers coded the responses, flagging when identified contextual factors (as per the list below) were present in a participant's response. From this analysis, the different family types started to emerge, based on the contextual factors (Table 2) present within different families. This allowed researchers to undertake a qualitative segmentation analysis, finding there were family types that could be described by:

- Internal contexts – Motivation of parents/carers – motivation to perform the behaviour: their attitudes, beliefs, influences, and barriers.
- Internal contexts - Ability of parents/carers - ability to perform the behaviour: their capacity, competency, knowledge and consciousness/awareness.
- External contexts - Physical environment - opportunity to perform the behaviour supported by the physical environment, perception of and interaction with RSAS service, School and Community.
- External contexts – Social environment – social norms and influencers of performing the behaviour like role models and cultural authority.

Table 2: Internal and external factors determining pre-disposition to school attendance

Internal context	Internal context	External context	External context
Motivation of parents/carers	Ability of parents/carers	Physical environment	Social environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attitudes towards education</li> <li>• Attitudes towards school</li> <li>• Attitudes towards RSAS</li> <li>• Fears</li> <li>• Aspirations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of role RSAS</li> <li>• Knowledge of school</li> <li>• Social and emotional wellbeing</li> <li>• Economic participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aspects of climate and landscape</li> <li>• Aspects of school</li> <li>• Aspects of RSAS</li> <li>• Aspects of community</li> <li>• Economic participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social norms</li> <li>• Social influence</li> <li>• Social identity</li> <li>• Cultural authority</li> </ul>

Families were then grouped based on their perception of their internal contextual factors (Motivation and Ability) and their views on the external contextual factors (Physical and Social Environment). Families have been grouped together because they display similar positive (+) or negative (-) responses against the contextual factors identified in the research. For a family to display a positive (+), they had to indicate this factor was positively influencing school attendance, and came through strongly in their story or this context resonated with them or felt true to their experience. Where a negative (-) is shown, the opposite is true or their perception or experience is negatively impacting school attendance.

The positive or negative influence of each contextual factor is outlined for each family group in the following table.

Table 3: Summary of MAPS contextual factors by family type influencing school attendance

	MAPS	Contextual factors	Committed Families	Protective Families	Unsure Families	Disconnected Families
Internal Contexts	Motivation	Attitudes towards education	+++	+	---	+
		Attitudes towards school	+	-	-	---
		Attitudes towards RSAS	+	-	-	-
		Fears	-	+++	+	+
		Aspirations	+	+	-	+
	Ability	Knowledge of role RSAS	+++	-	-	-
		Knowledge of school	+	---	---	-
		Social and emotional wellbeing	+	+	+	---
External Contexts	Physical environment	Aspects of climate and landscape	-	-	-	-
		Aspects of school	+	---	-	-
		Aspects of RSAS	+	-	-	-
		Aspects of community	+	-	+++	---
		Economic participation	+++	+	-	-
	Social environment	Social norms	+++	+	-	-
		Social influence	+	---	-	-
		Social identity	+	+	-	---
		Cultural authority	+	+	+++	-

Where a contextual factor is the biggest influence on school attendance for each context, it is emphasized with three symbols and shaded (e.g. +++).

- Committed Families' school attendance behaviour is influenced by:
  - motivation driven by positive attitudes towards education
  - ability that is positively influenced by their knowledge of RSAS
  - physical environment that has routine because the parent/carer is working or attending CDP
  - social environment where it is the norm to go to school.
- Protective Families' school attendance behaviour is influenced by:
  - motivation driven by negative fears of what may happen to their children
  - ability that is negatively influenced by lack of knowledge of the school
  - physical environment that is negative perceptions of the school
  - social environment where others' negativity influences their decision making.
- Unsure Families' school attendance behaviour is influenced by:
  - motivation driven by negative attitudes towards education
  - ability that is negatively influenced by lack of knowledge of the school or school's lack of knowledge or respect for culture
  - physical environment that has traditional cultural obligations, lore or practices
  - social environment where it is the cultural authorities that enforce traditional culture and practices.
- Disconnected Families' school attendance behaviour is influenced by:
  - motivation driven by negative attitudes towards the school or how they may fit in at school
  - ability that is positively influenced by their social isolation or ability to connect with others
  - physical environment that is one where they don't want to cause trouble or have conflict with others
  - social environment where they don't feel they belong or are welcome.

Based on the qualitative data, researchers could start to segment families by these contextual factors. The family types were described by the common attitudes and beliefs held about school attendance and labelled based on their most dominant contextual factors. However, is important to note that just because a family might appear to fit well within one family type, it does not mean they will hold every attitude and belief outlined in the descriptions in the table. Grouping families by contextual factors identified from the qualitative

data requires researchers to make generalisations about the common themes observed in participant's interview responses. These descriptions can help policy makers and program staff identify and support families in different contexts and at different points in their lives, but they cannot describe every family all the time.

Each family is unique and many different factors may be present at any one time for any one family (i.e. one parent/carer may have tendencies for one family type while a second parent/carer may have tendencies for another family type). Through story telling families told us that at times they had felt and behaved like one family type but when circumstances or local contexts changed they felt or behaved like another family type. This means that families shift from one family type to another over time. For example, an Unsure Family may become a Committed Family if there is a change of circumstances at the school (for example a cultural authority becomes a teacher's aide). If a Disconnected Family is approached by a RSAS worker who is the right cultural fit and explains how they can get their children to school (which allows them to form stronger community ties), they could become a Committed Family because they have more support. However, for the purposes of this research the family types are used to help to gain insight into what support strategies work for different families under different circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

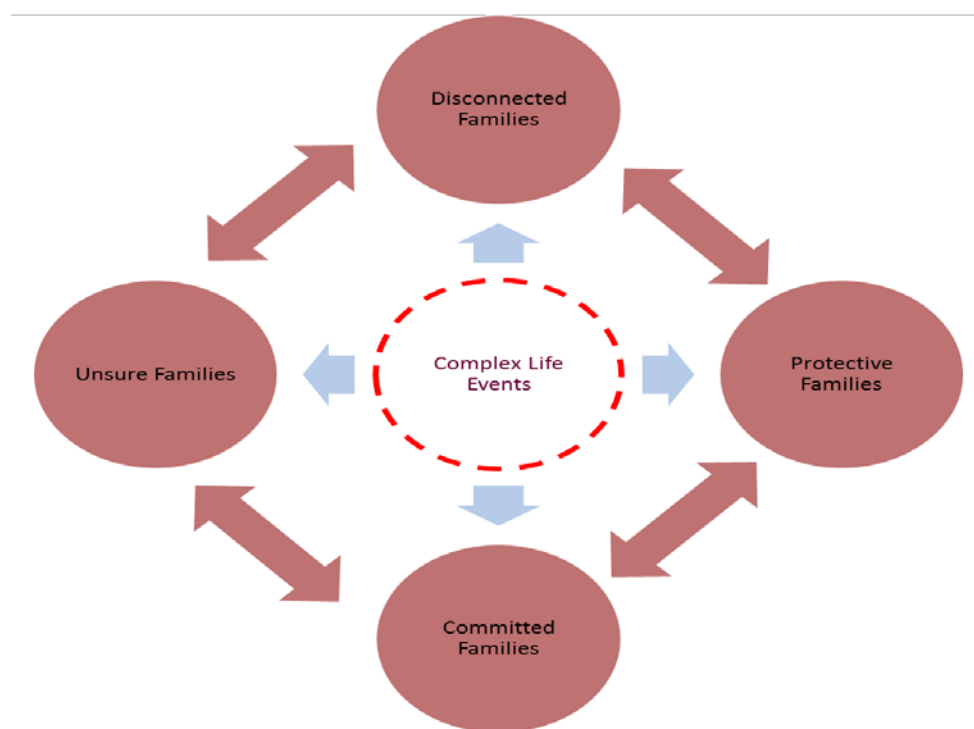


Figure 3: Diagram of the movement of family types and life events

<sup>7</sup> This image illustrates how Family Types can move from one family type to another, or occasionally experience Complex Life Events. It highlights the notion that Families are not permanently fixed or rigid and that transitions between family types is normal.



## 2.3 Describing the Family Types

Once the family types were identified by their broad context, deeper analysis of each one was undertaken to better describe these families. This section takes a deeper look into what makes up the sources of behaviour for each family type based on the MAPS contextual factors.

**Committed Families** are **motivated** to send their children to school every day. They value education because they believe it will lead to a job. They also value the school, believing that it provides a good education. They believe school is a safe environment for their kids and have positive aspirations for their children. Committed Families have the **ability** to send their kids to school. They understand what services are available, and are confident seeking help if they require assistance. They know the teachers at the school and understand how the school operates. They believe the school consults well with the community. They have a positive attitude towards their own and their children's social and emotional wellbeing. Their children are happy and healthy and they have a strong extended family network to draw on for support. One or both parents or carers are working or are *Community Development Programme (CDP)* participants and they regularly get up early in the morning to help their children get to school.

There are no barriers to their **physical environment** – it is easy and safe for their kids to go to school, and they believe their kids will be safe once there. They regard the community to be a safe and cohesive place to live and bring up children, or they believe they can keep their kids safe in the community, even if there are some problems. They believe that education leads to real jobs.

Committed Families live in positive **social environments**. They mix with people who have positive social norms; for example, those who reinforce the importance of school attendance through their actions. Most people in their peer group take children to school before going to work. They have positive social influences in their extended family and know influential people in the community who support children attending school. They have a positive social identity and cultural authority in the community.

*"I feel happy my children are going to school every day, even when my children are sick they still want to go to school." - Parent*

*"They feel happy when they are with their friends and sad when they don't go to school." - Parent*

**Protective Families** are **motivated** to send their children to school and aspire for them to be educated and get a job. However, because they also fear their children will be physically or emotionally bullied (either at school or on route to and from school), their motivation to keep their children safe outweighs the desire to get them to school. Protective Families have mixed attitudes towards school and support services, with some feeling they are not doing enough to deal with issues relating to bullying/teasing, and others believing they are trying, but that it is still not enough.

Protective Families have the **ability** send their kids to school, but are not always sure the school and community services are doing enough to keep their kids safe. They are concerned about their children's social and emotional wellbeing. However, they know about the support services available, and understand how to access if they need help. Their children are typically healthy and well-rested unless they have been truant for some time, in which case their sleep patterns become more erratic due to late nights.

At times, the **physical environment** of the school and community can prevent Protective Families sending their children to school e.g. when there is community unrest and violence. Some parents of some Protective

Families work and are inclined to rise early and get to work, or they have routine behaviour.

Protective Families are very concerned about things in the **physical environment** which may be a threat to children's safety, particularly if bullying is occurring. They see how bullying impacts their children. They want to see bullying addressed in the community and the school. They would like those with social influence and strong social identities to work with the school to address their safety concerns. Until their concerns are addressed, they are unlikely to send their children to school. They share fears with friends and families about what bullying/teasing means for their children and keep them home so they can keep watch over them.

*"If they get bullied one day, the next day they stay home no matter what we say to try and get them to school"- Parent*

*"My children don't go [to school] because they are being bullied. They sneak away and walk around all night with other boys and then they sleep in."- Parent*

*"When children get teased at school yellow shirts don't help our children in the class. Yellow shirts should be the right person to help our children - like someone who doesn't growl all the time"- Parent*

**Unsure Families** are not **motivated** to send their children to school because they value traditional learning (language and culture) over mainstream education. They also do not see the value of education because they don't see any jobs in their communities. While they believe school is physically safe for their children, they do not believe school will support their vision of the kind of life they want for their children, and they may see it as culturally unsafe. If the school is culturally unsafe, many Unsure Families will fear the school, as they may think it is a threat to culture and traditional ways of living. As such their attitude towards both school and support services is one of apprehension.

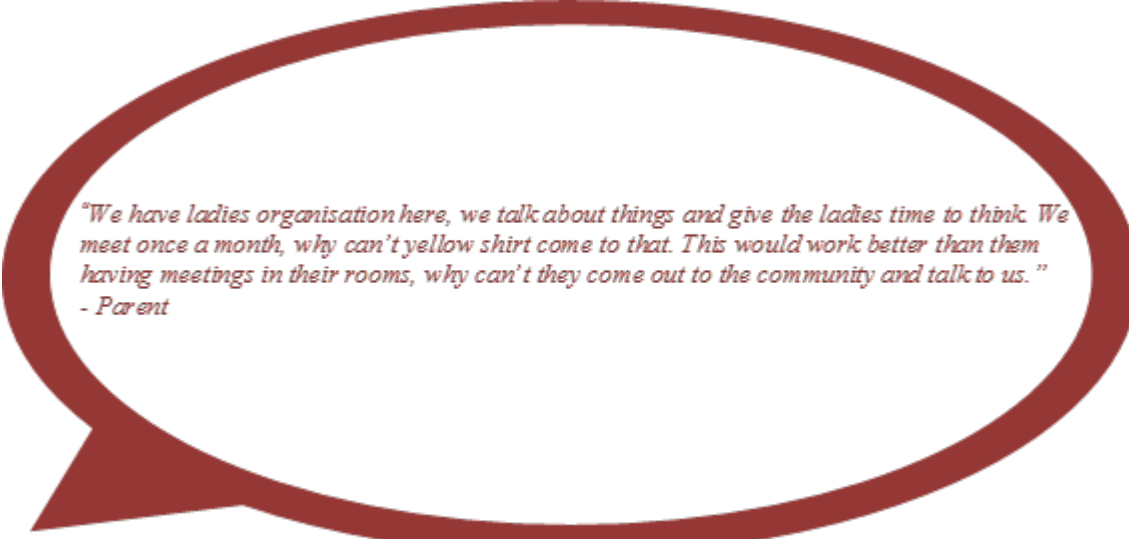
Most Unsure Families have the **ability** to send their children to school, apart from those times when they and their children might be hunting or attending cultural events out of community. Their children are typically healthy and rested. Parents of Unsure Families are unlikely to have had much formal schooling themselves and usually do not hold regular employment. If they do work, it is often sporadic as they may travel frequently for cultural reasons, and may also struggle to find ongoing employment (either because of mobility, a lack of jobs available, or the fact that they do not have a formal education required for some jobs). They may not know much about the school or about what services are available. Provided the staff are culturally appropriate, they will be willing to hear about what services are offered, and will be able to access them, should they feel this is an appropriate choice for their children.

Unsure Families live in a variety of environmental conditions, but there are usually few barriers in their **physical environmental** to prevent their children going to school – apart from those times when they may be far away.

Unsure Families live in unique **social environments** which can be at odds with 'Western' thinking about what is the 'right way to live'. They are strongly influenced by traditional culture and other families who share the belief that traditional ways of life are not being promoted or respected by the school or other support services. For cultural reasons, children of Unsure Families may regularly stay with extended kin and not be in the immediate care of their parents. They are strongly influenced by people in the community who have



cultural authority, and will take advice from cultural authorities. Unsure Families lack knowledge about RSAS and the school and don't know what exactly it is they do, so are easily influenced by those with cultural authority who don't support going to school or the RSAS service. Conversely, those with cultural authority can also influence Unsure Families to engage with school and services, if they can convince them this is what is best for their children and a for ensuring they are strong in culture.




*"We have ladies organisation here, we talk about things and give the ladies time to think. We meet once a month, why can't yellow shirt come to that. This would work better than them having meetings in their rooms, why can't they come out to the community and talk to us."*  
- Parent

**Disconnected Families** are not **motivated** to send their children to school because they feel socially separate from the community they live in and are afraid their children might pick up antisocial behaviour from the other children. They are supportive of their children getting an education, but their disconnection with the broader community includes a disconnection with the school. They are not engaged in the schooling community, and do not know how to connect. Disconnected Families are also emotionally afraid of standing out from the crowd and fear what might physically happen to them if they do become noticed. They avoid conflict by staying apart from everyone else.

Disconnected Families do not have the **ability** to send their children to school because they have little understanding of the school or what services are available. They also do not know if these services are intended for them and their social isolation prevents them from finding out. The children of Disconnected Families are not unusually ill, though they can be tired if they stay out late at night.

Some Disconnected Families may have significant attendance barriers in their **physical environment**. They may live on the outskirts of the community and so travel to school could be hard without some form of transport helping them with this environmental factor. The parents of Disconnected Families may go to work, if there are jobs available in the community for them, and so can wake up early in the morning.

Disconnected Families live in their own **social environment**, isolated from a significant proportion of their community. They mix with those like them, who face similar isolation. Relationships within their families can be harmonious, but they remain apart from the broader community. Given their fears of standing out and being shamed, they are unlikely to reach out for help, particularly if they are spoken to 'roughly' or 'growled at' or 'yelled' at in public from people who have culturally authority.

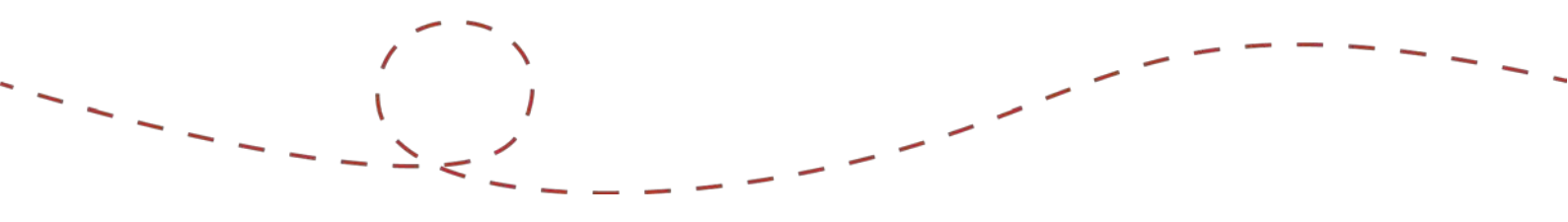


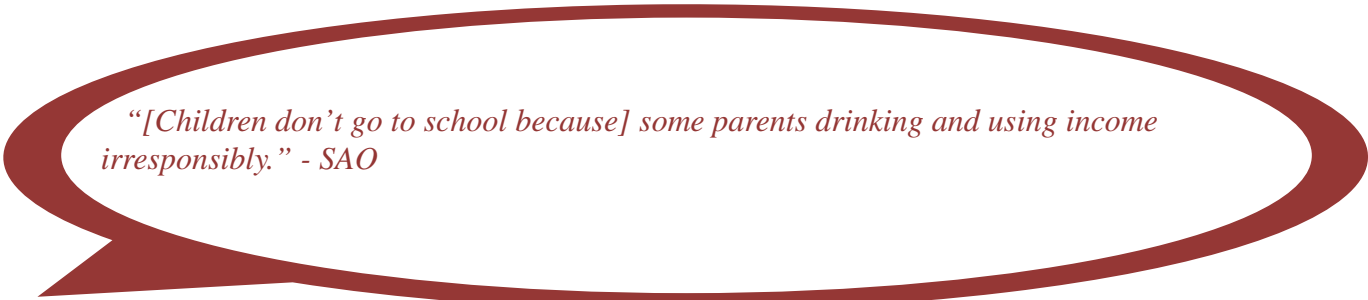
*"[Yellow shirts come to my house and talk rough to me about my children when they don't go to school. Yellow shirt also talk rough to me in public such as when I'm at the shop and shire office and clinic they just shout at me about my children not going to school. It hurts me when they talk rough to me in front of everyone." - Parent*

### Complex Life Events

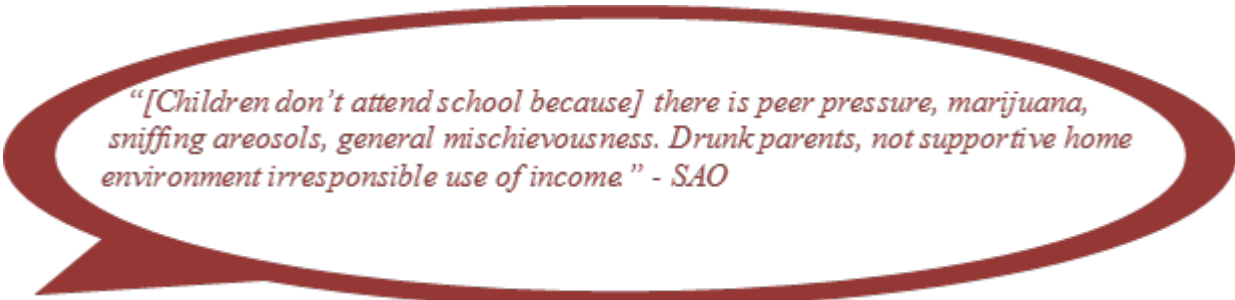
Whether it is only for a short period, or for extended periods of time, families (and members of their household) can occasionally fall into a period of life where they experience Complex Life Events. This means either they themselves, or members of their households, may experience things like substance abuse issues, gambling problems, physical and mental health issues, loss of a loved one, financial difficulties, family problems, domestic violence, criminal justice issues or homelessness and overcrowding. When this occurs, these families are not **motivated** to send their children to school because getting their children an education is not seen to be as important as other things that they need to contend with. These families do not have the **ability** to get children to school, and are often unable to seek help. Not only are they disconnected from services and school, their children are also often sick and tired due to the range of complex issues faced, including often harsh environmental conditions.

Families experiencing Complex Life Events have difficult **physical environments**. Their housing can be itinerant and overcrowded and parents of families with multiple needs are less likely to be in the workforce or have routines. Complex Life Events are not connected to community or family – they can happen to anyone, at any time. Families' **social environments** may start out positive; however, due the complexity of the issues faced, some families experiencing Complex Life Events can become disconnected from their community. When any family experiences Complex Life Events, other social support structures can influence them to get their children to school, or assist them to do so, if there are specialist support services available to meet their needs.





*“[Children don’t go to school because] some parents drinking and using income irresponsibly.” - SAO*



*“[Children don’t attend school because] there is peer pressure, marijuana, sniffing areosols, general mischievousness. Drunk parents, not supportive home environment irresponsible use of income ” - SAO*

## 2.4 How different family types interact with RSAS

Now that the four family types and one set of life circumstances have been identified and briefly described, this section will explain how participants in the different family types described their interactions with RSAS and other parts of the complex school attendance system. The section will describe the most and least effective strategies seen to support improved school attendance or engagement for each family type.

There are numerous strategies that can support families to get their children to school. Effective support strategies offer what is necessary (or at least sufficient) for triggering or strengthening the mechanisms that already exist within a family. Mechanisms can be a range of different things which influence internal decision making, such as thoughts, feelings, beliefs or understandings of a situation. For example, a family may believe school makes their children happy and send them every day. But these mechanisms can change, depending on a family’s situation. The family might change their beliefs about school when a new teacher arrives who the family does not know or trust. Therefore, the support strategies needed will vary depending on families’ internal and external contexts. For example, a family may be internally motivated to send children to school and can be helped to achieve this goal by providing a bus. However, if the same family’s washing machine breaks and they do not have clean clothes for their children, they may be too internally ashamed to send children to school. Support services might anger or shame the family if they do not recognise the change to the family’s context and adapt support strategies accordingly.

Applying the MAPS framework, this research showed RSAS’s place-based model – whose activities varied from place to place – could support or weaken a family’s predisposition to school attendance. Whether it supported or weakened a family depended on the family type and the kinds of activities RSAS undertook. For example, where RSAS provided encouragement to go to school or incentives (Motivation), breakfasts (Ability), bus travel (Physical) and cultural authority (Social), it strengthened mechanisms of Committed Families and some Protective Families. In this family context, and in a community that supports education, the RSAS simply makes life easier for students to attend school. It becomes a convenient, ordinary and

stigma-free way to get children to school. It also makes it easier for those who are somewhat disposed to attending school but may need additional support to make it habitual (because a full stomach, transport and social norms are present).

On the other hand, where RSAS activities were conducted where parents, for example, feel overwhelmed and unable to cope (Motivation), children routinely sick or tired (Ability), no bus is available (Physical), and bullying regularly threatens safety (Social), many RSAS activities were less successful. This is particularly true for families who were experiencing Complex Life Events. For these families, greater interventions and resources were required, and RSAS worked best as a referral pathway to more specialist support services.

There were also several things parents perceived RSAS staff to be doing which when applied in the wrong contexts, de-motivated some families. This included where RSAS activities resulted in children and parents feeling threatened or fearing engagement (Motivation), a lack of sufficient information or consultation to understand and participate in RSAS (Ability), the bus did not include pickups for some locations (Physical), and families felt RSAS staff excluded them from the service (Social). For these families, a more targeted approach was required.

The experiences of the different family types and their interactions with RSAS are described for each family type below. This includes examples of the types of RSAS activities which were perceived to be working for different families, and those which families perceived as demotivating. This will include tables with a small set of context, mechanism, outcome (CMO) statements that explain how and why the particular activities do (or do not) work for each of the family types.

## Committed Families

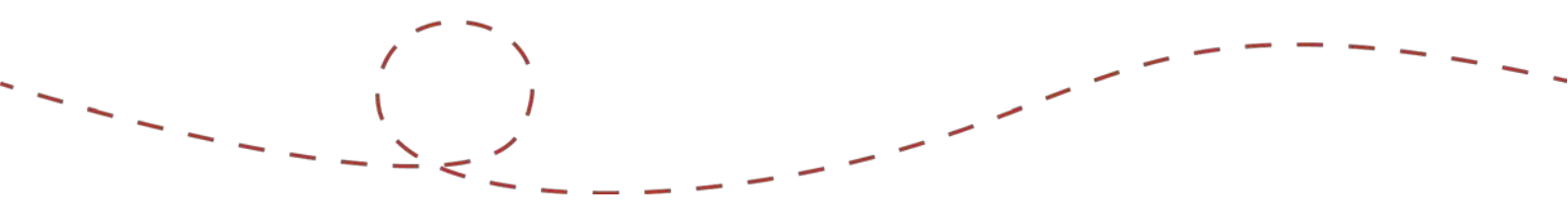
### What motivates and supports attendance for Committed Families

Committed Families already have strong motivation toward school attendance, and as such they respond well when RSAS staff remind them they are doing a good job. To ensure they continue to take an active role in getting their children to school, they also require RSAS and the school to 'keep them in the loop' about what is happening in the classroom and what this will mean for their children later in life. Increasing their knowledge and understanding of what is happening in class will increase their awareness of learning, support dialogue between parents and their children about learning, and make parents even more invested in getting their children a good education.

Some Committed Families may also need access to basic services from time to time, such as a daily bus service. However, it should not be assumed that they need help. Committed Families are supported best, when they are offered clear information about what services are available, and are allowed to choose which services they would like to use for themselves. It is important that services are offered, and made available where needed, but if the family is already doing what is needed to get their children to school, it is equally important Committed Families are not undermined, or made to feel like they are not doing a good job.

Activities that were found to be most effective for Committed Families include:

- Setting clear expectations about the purpose and delivery of RSAS services. It is important the services communicate clearly so families can choose which aspects of RSAS they wish to utilise. Committed Families are more likely to use only some practical support. They also respond positively to some friendly occasional updates or reminders about the value of regular attendance. They are unlikely to need regular visits, or intensive ongoing support.
- Investing time and energy to build positive relationships with the whole family, including through following up with the family when good things happen (for example a child doing a good job in class). This increases the Committed Families' trust in services like RSAS and helps empower them to continue getting their children to school.
- Working within the school, or RSAS staff demonstrating a close working relationship with the school,



strengthens Committed Families' existing engagement with School and RSAS. It gives the RSAS team credibility with Committed Families, and reinforces the feeling that the school is a culturally safe and welcoming space for the community and for children.

The table below shows some examples of the types of statements made by participants who were identified as Committed Families. These statements are explained using the CMO configuration, explained above.

*Table 4: What motivates Committed Families explained using the CMO configuration*

Context (situation)	Mechanise (leads to)	Outcome (what happens)
I know the RSAS bus services is reliable and runs on time. I have met the people who drive the bus and found them friendly and helpful...	... I feel like I can trust the RSAS team and rely on them to help me when I need it...	... I make a big effort to get my children to school every day, but sometimes I need a bit of help, so I put them on the RSAS bus.
RSAS staff came to my house and told me about how my child is doing well in math classes...	.... I feel proud of my child and feel good about how they are doing at school, and I can see school helping them for the future....	... I will do everything in my power to make sure my child keeps going to school every day possible.

### What can de-motivate Committed Families

Many Committed Families don't require a lot of assistance to get their children to school. Small practical things may be all that is needed, like the occasional positive re-enforcement, clear information about basic services at the school, and things like a bus service. When too much support is given, this can undermine a family's existing motivation to get children to school, and demotivate them or create ongoing dependence. For example, one parent told us about how they took pride in walking their children to school every morning, and felt they were a good parent doing their job. When services like RSAS tried to replace this role, the parent felt less involved. The parent told us they lost the feeling that getting their children to school was their responsibility. This had an unintended consequence of decreasing attendance, by creating service dependency. The repercussions of this were particularly evident in those areas where service delivery was inconsistent, as it became too easy for families not to get their children to school. For example if the service does not show up or is inconvenient, parents may feel the service had failed, but not look for alternate options to get children to school, as they may no longer believe it is their job to do so. As such, it is very important for Committed Families that services like RSAS acknowledge when they are already fulfilling their responsibilities, and do not try to take over doing things parents or other family members are already doing. It is also important to offer a predictable and consistent service, which families can trust and rely on.

Committed Families do not respond to being told off or feeling shamed if for some reason they are not able to get children to school for the day. If they are made to feel shame, Committed Families are much less likely to use RSAS services in the future, which can have an impact on their children's future attendance. When made to feel shame about school attendance outcomes, some Committed Families can start to feel less confident in their parenting abilities over time, and this may lead to them being less committed to school attendance. It can also lead to them avoiding future confrontation by avoiding RSAS staff.

Activities that were found to be the least effective for Committed Families included:

- Over servicing families by doing things that duplicated and replaced activities the family were already doing (for example, getting children to school every day or making breakfast). This damages Committed Families' self-esteem, removes existing motivation and decreases parents' future involvement in their children's schooling and school attendance.
- Telling off, shaming or growling at Committed Families tends to lead to service avoidance and

- potentially a reduction in self-esteem and therefore parenting ability.
- Excluding Committed Families entirely and assuming that they don't need any support may cause them to feel like the service does not consult community. Committed Families want to be actively involved in their children's education. If they are not consulted, they may assume the service is too paternalistic, or not culturally appropriate. It may also result in families not asking for help at times when they do need it.

Table 5: What demotivates Committed Families explained using the CMO configuration

Context (situation)	Mechanise (leads to)	Outcome (what happens)
RSAS has told me I must use the RSAS bus, but I used to walk my children every morning...	... I feel like RSAS has replaced me and I am no longer needed. I don't have that time to talk to my children anymore...	...I no longer try to get my children to school; I don't know what they do at school. I no longer think it is my job to get my children to school.
The RSAS team does not talk to me much except to tell me if I do something wrong. I don't know what they do, or what the service is all about...	... I feel like RSAS does not consult me or my community about the goings on here...	... I don't use RSAS even if I can't get my kids to school some days. I still get my children to school most days, but I tell my friends and family not to use their services because I know they will just growl at them.

## Protective Families

### What motivates and supports attendance for Protective Families

Most parents have a natural desire to see their children happy and smiling, however this tendency is particularly strong in Protective Families. These families are very concerned with their children's safety. If they fear the school environment may be harmful to their children in any way, they will be unlikely to send them to school, regardless of what support services (or punitive measures) are put in place. Protective families must be convinced that their children will be safe from bullying and teasing, if they are to send their children to school or use the RSAS service. Where parents know RSAS ensures a safe environment on the journey to and from school and that their children will be protected they will be open to using the service. Similarly, if they are assured their children will be safe and happy inside the school gate, they are more likely to get their children to school. This is helped when Protective Families are familiar with the RSAS workers and have an ongoing open and honest rapport with RSAS teams, teachers and other school staff. Inviting Protective Families into the school to see for themselves that existing policies will help reduce their fears. Similarly, a role model who is a respected person in the community, who is able to advocate for good anti-bullying strategies will also help families get kids to school.

For many Protective Families, children's safety also extends to children's happiness. If parents think children will be sad because of school they will protect them against this. Unhappiness is seen as a strong threat to children's wellbeing and safety for many Protective Families. Therefore, it is important for Protective Families to hear about good things happening at the school, and see their children having fun. Having this demonstrated to them also prevents children using bullying/teasing as an excuse to just stay home. For example, introducing them to the teacher, setting up meetings to talk about anti-bullying strategies or showing them photos of their children doing fun in-school activities are strong school attendance motivators for Protective Families.

However, we were also told that some children pleaded with their parents to stay home because they did not like school. Even when these children were not exposed to harm, parents often conceded to them because they were not equipped or motivated enough to get them to school. It is therefore not always enough for



parents to want to send their children to school. For long-term behaviour change, children too must enjoy school. This was most commonly the case when they had friends who also went to school or if they had fun teachers that made learning fun (predominantly Committed Families). Where this was evident, parents and children were motivated.

Activities that were found to be most effective for Protective Families included:

- Listening to their concerns, and making sure these concerns are addressed. For example, supporting parents to come to the school and helping them to talk directly to teachers or the principal about what is happening.
- Offering fun activities for children, and inviting parents to see these activities, so they know that school can help their children be happier.
- Helping parents to address and reduce their fears. For example, developing anti-bullying strategies with the school and community.

Table 6: What motivates Protective Families explained using the CMO configuration

Context (situation)	Mechanise (leads to)	Outcome (what happens)
My child was being bullied at school, so I told my RSAS worker, who talked to the teacher for me...	I feel like my child is much safer now, and seems much happier about going to school...	...I now send my child to school every day, because I know it is important, and I want them to get a good education.
There were lots of dogs on the road to school, and I was scared for my children's safety. The RSAS worker came and told me how my children could catch the bus....	I feel much better now I know my children have a safe way to get to and from school, and I don't have to worry anymore...	... I make sure my children get on the bus every morning and go to school.

### What de-motivates Protective Families

When Protective Families are given rhetoric about school safety which does not match what they observe, they will be less likely to send their children to school in the future. For example if they are told their children will be safe from bullying but then bullying occurs, this reduces their trust in the school or RSAS service. For Protected Families, it is critical to have an honest conversation about their concerns. If their concerns are dismissed (for example, families are told their concerns about school or teachers are unfounded) then Protective Families are much less likely to engage in the future. They are also quick to perceive the RSAS service or school as negative or untrustworthy. Protective Families need their concerns to be heard, validated and actioned. This might mean changing policies to improve safety at the school or on the bus (social or physical restructuring). They are more likely to respond positively if they can see the RSAS/school staff are trained on how to deal with bullying.

Punitive measures are not effective in increasing attendance for Protective Families because their children's safety (both real and perceived) is the most important thing to them. They would rather be punished than feel their children are unsafe. Ultimately their instinct is to protect their children from harm, and unless they can be convinced their children are safe, this will always outweigh their motivation to get their children an education. From a hierarchical perspective, safety is more important than education, so only when they feel safety is secured can Protective Families move towards getting kids to school.

It should be noted that getting children to school requires more than just parents feeling assured their children will be safe. Simply removing the threat of physical or emotional harm alone is not enough to increase school attendance. After addressing their fear, Protective Families may become Committed Families, for example, but they may also experience Complex Life Events and require other types of support. Addressing fears will be one of the highest priorities for these families, but they may also have other support

needs such as friendly advice on the importance of children having an education and or other basic supports, like a bus service.

Activities that were found to be the least effective for Protective Families included:

- Dismissing fears without addressing them. For example, saying the school is a safe place, if bullying at school (or on the way to school) is not being properly addressed.
- Trying to force families to use a service or send their children to school, without addressing base concerns. This will only cause an increase in fear and Protective Families will become more protective (e.g. hiding from RSAS staff and avoiding teachers and other staff from the school).
- Ignoring other important enabling factors and focusing only on addressing fear. For example, reminding parents that they are doing a good job and informing them about services they can access if they need help.

Table 7: What demotivates Protective Families explained using the CMO configuration

Context (situation)	Mechanise (leads to)	Outcome (what happens)
I told the RSAS worker and the teacher I think my child is being bullied, but they told me that my child was exaggerating and it wasn't very bad...	I feel like no one listens to me, or believes me. I am still worried about my child, and am scared to see them so unhappy...	...I will help my child to avoid school, as it is not good for them to be so unhappy. I will keep them home with me, so I know they are safe.
My child comes home from school crying and unhappy. He can't keep up in class, and is scared the teacher will tell him off. The RSAS worker told me that the teacher wouldn't yell, but I don't know that teacher...	I feel scared when my child is unhappy and I am still unsure if I can trust his teacher. I know school is important, but not at the risk of my child's wellbeing...	... I will let my child stay home to make sure he is safe.

## Unsure Families

### What motivates and supports attendance for Unsure Families

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families rightly believe culture is critical to ensuring their children's wellbeing, however in Unsure Families, this is especially important. Because they don't believe school will likely lead to a job for their children, Unsure Families are often not convinced sending their children to school is worthwhile. They often believe that traditional forms of education are the only learnings that will be useful for their children. As such, Unsure Families respond positively to the RSAS service and school when the school is able to integrate traditional learning into classroom activities. Additionally, if staff have strong cultural competency, or actively demonstrate cultural safety at the school or within the RSAS service, Unsure Families are significantly more likely to engage. When families can see that RSAS or school staff have cultural authority, they will listen to them about school. When some of the learning that takes place in the school reflects traditional Indigenous values, Unsure Families will be more likely to participate in schooling. For example, some parents told us they felt valued when the curriculum had Indigenous learning embedded within it.

Unsure Families are also significantly more likely to send children to school if they have an Elder or other cultural authority endorse schooling and, specifically, any cultural education that happens in the school. Parents and other family members will often support children to attend school activities that take them out into community for traditional cultural knowledge or learning. If Elders with cultural authority can work with the school to teach this knowledge, Unsure Families can become strong advocates of school and school attendance.



To a lesser extent, Unsure Families can also be motivated or persuaded to send their children to school when a relative who they trust talks to them about the importance of school. For example, when the RSAS worker is related to Unsure Families, they are more likely to listen to them. For those Unsure Families who don't believe that mainstream education is worthwhile, it is beneficial to show them examples of local people who have been successful because of their education. Modelling of this sort helps them develop job aspirations or offers a role model their children can look up to. Similarly, if Unsure Families truly believe the RSAS staff or school teachers are there to help them and their children, they are more likely to engage. To build this trust, families require staff to be respectful of cultural practices, but also have strong positive engagement skills, such as patience, good communication and non-judgmental listening.

Activities that were found to be most effective for Unsure Families included:

- Employing RSAS and school staff that have a good cultural or social 'fit' with families and children. When there is reciprocal respect in a relationship, less effort is expended to connect, and communicate. This makes it easier for parents/carers to engage, meaning they are less likely to avoid RSAS or school staff.
- Introducing families to role models from the local community, who can demonstrate the benefits of education, and talk to families about how school can benefit children. For example, if a local ranger who is highly respected can explain how school helps them in their job.
- Using positive engagement skills to build respect, trust and rapport with families. For example, talking kindly to parents, listening and respecting their point of view, and demonstrating that children can have both a strong cultural education and formal schooling, and that families do not have to choose between one or the other.

Table 8: What motivates Unsure Families explained using the CMO configuration

Context (situation)	Mechanise (leads to)	Outcome (what happens)
I have met the RSAS staff and found them to be respectful and easy to talk to. They understand me and my family's cultural needs ...	I feel like I can engage and talk freely with RSAS staff because they understand where I am coming from and we share the same values...	...I am happy to accept the help from RSAS and want to plan with them to get my children to go to school.
The RSAS staff come at 8:00 to give me a chance to get the boys ready and then come back at 10:00 if the kids are not at school...	I feel supported by RSAS staff who have the same life experiences and cultural values and know why those boys had to wait for their Uncle...	...I want to work with RSAS staff to develop new strategies to make sure my children go to school every day.

### What can de-motivate Unsure Families and have unintended consequences

If Unsure Families feel that RSAS or school staff are disrespectful, aggressive or judgmental towards them, they will become even less motivated to send their children to school. This is particularly true if school or RSAS staff are dismissive of their traditional way of life or their families' values. Such counter-productive dealings can move parents from a state of indifference, to one of outright negativity towards RSAS and the school. This is because this type of engagement causes their values and RSAS/school values to be in conflict. This causes Unsure Families to not only lose respect, but can move them to reject the school system overall. Most parents don't like being told what they should do with their children. This is especially true for parents of Unsure Families. If they feel they are treated unfairly, they become more entrenched in their way of thinking – which is already ill-disposed to sending their children to school.

In some circumstances, there appeared to be a lot of misinformation about the role of the RSAS staff. Some families participating in the research attributed this to a lack of community input into the design of local RSAS strategies. For Unsure Families who felt the local plan for the RSAS team was not being developed in a

thoughtful, considered, representative or truly participatory manner, this led to negative outcomes and resentment. Unsure Families also described some situations where they feared RSAS workers. This was because they thought something bad would happen to truant children if caught (for example, police involvement). When Unsure Families feared RSAS, they were even less inclined to send children to school. As an extreme example, we were told some families thought the RSAS staff would steal their children from them and take them into custody. This led to Unsure Families telling their children to stay away from RSAS staff.

Activities that were found to be least effective for Unsure Families included:

- Displaying behaviours that might be perceived as threatening or language that is aggressive. This will cause families to feel negativity towards the RSAS service and school system and they will feel even less motivated to send their children to school.
- Dismissing the values and beliefs of families. Not showing respect for culture will cause families to lose respect for service providers and reject the school system overall.
- Failing to involve families in the design of local strategies. If Unsure Families are not consulted in planning, this will lead them to feel the plan is being imposed on them, rather than supporting them.

Table 9: What demotivates Unsure Families explained using the CMO configuration

Context (situation)	Mechanise (leads to)	Outcome (what happens)
Sometimes the RSAS staff come to my house and threaten to bring the police to force me to take my children to school...	I feel scared that we will lose our way of life...	...I don't like the RSAS service and don't want them to come to my house.
RSAS staff talk rough to me in public - when I'm at the shop, shire office and clinic. They shout at me about my children going to school...	I feel embarrassed and ashamed that they are causing trouble when they should know better the cultural reasons why...	...I have no respect for the RSAS service and no intention of sending my children to school.

## Disconnected Families

### What motivates and supports attendance for Disconnected Families

Disconnected Families believe education is important for their children. However, they are often not motivated to send their children to school because they are physically and/or socially isolated from the broader community. This can result in Disconnected Families being unsure of, and disengaged with, the RSAS service and school. This isolation can cause some families to be afraid of people they don't know, and they may have a strong fear of doing or saying the wrong thing. As such, many disconnected families do not feel confident seeking help and will not reach out to services if they are struggling. They may be worried about causing shame or conflict, so they keep to themselves. Support which helps Disconnected Families increase their knowledge and understanding of school and other services can help improve their children's attendance. Often this can be done through simple activities, such as taking families to meet the teachers at school or introducing them to people in the community and explaining how things work. By helping families better understand and connect with the broader community, RSAS can help reduce fear. This can in turn empower families to be more actively involved in their children's schooling.

Given that Disconnected families already have a high level of fear about being shamed, it is also critical staff approach them in a non-judgemental, supportive and friendly manner. When communication is warm and open, Disconnected Families feel that people are genuinely there to help. As such they are more open to hearing what RSAS and school staff have to say. For example, some Disconnected Families told us that the 'right' RSAS staff had pushed them into action by simply taking the time to introduce themselves and explain what RSAS did. In this instance, RSAS helped the family understand what RSAS was, how they could access it and that they wouldn't be judged for using it. Dealing with families in a non-judgemental and

‘culturally right’ way can also challenge any stigma that may be associated with using support services.

Because Disconnected Families are not integrated into the broader community and often have different cultural authority figures from those they live amongst, it is important that the RSAS staff have the right cultural standing for these families. This may not always be the same person/people who are the ‘right’ cultural fit for the broader community.

Activities that were found to be most effective for Disconnected Families included:

- Taking the time to talk to parents/carers about what services are available and how they can be accessed. This builds trust, a mutually respectful relationship and families who want to access services will feel more confident and capable of doing so.
- Introducing families to teachers, service providers and other people in the community. This helps to reduce social isolation, and reduces fear of engagement – empowering families to be more involved in their children’s education.
- Being open, friendly and addressing any stigma associated with using the service.
- Ensuring physical barriers are addressed, as well as social barriers. This may mean talking to the family (once they are comfortable with a service and know what it does) and getting more information about what type of additional support they may need.

Table 10: What motivates Disconnected Families explained using the CMO configuration

Context (situation)	Mechanise (leads to)	Outcome (what happens)
The RSAS service always show up to collect my children and take them to school with the other kids...	I feel they care about me and I can rely on RSAS service to come to my house and not leave me out...	...getting my children up in the morning and sending them to school has become a daily habit.
The RSAS are friendly and take the time it explain the service to me and treat me like I belong and my kids are welcome in their school...	I understand what the service does and how it can help me get my children to school which makes me feel part of the community...	...I feel happy about the RSAS service and want their help to get my children to school.

### What de-motivates Disconnected Families

Disconnected Families that are socially or physically isolated can become demotivated if they feel as though they have been (or will be) ignored, threatened or judged. They are not likely to engage with services or school staff about their children’s education if a trusting relationship has not first been established. For example, if an RSAS worker who is not known to a family comes to discuss a child’s absence from school, the family will be unlikely to engage. This is because they do not know what RSAS is, who the staff are and what the implications of engagement will be. Trying to force engagement may cause many Disconnected Families to grow even more mistrustful and apprehensive about the intention of RSAS. Therefore, it is important to first build a trusting relationship with the family, ensuring they understand what the service is about, before trying to get them to use the different elements of the service.

Furthermore, if Unsure Families believe the RSAS team or school staff are treating them differently from other families in the community, they may come to believe that the service or school sees them as less important. For example, we heard stories of families who felt that RSAS staff had talked roughly to them because they were from clan groups that conflicted with the RSAS’s own clan. When Disconnected Families feel they’re being treated unfairly or being dismissed, this gives them negative associations with the service and school more broadly. It can also push them from simple unawareness of the service or school to negative associations.

When Disconnected Families believe that specific services are not accessible to them, they can become resentful. For example, one family we talked to lived at an outstation. The family said that when the bus did not pick up their children – only focussing on those families in town – they grew upset. Such impressions cause these families to feel even further excluded than they already are, in turn making them even more disconnected and isolated from those around them. This makes them less likely to use the service or get their children to school. As such, it is important to ensure that families are given clear advice about what services are available to them, and how they can access them (for example, a map of the bus route). If this information is not provided, Disconnected Families may feel they are being deliberately excluded from a service, or their needs are being ignored, whether this is the case or not. They are unlikely to reach out to raise their concerns or talk about their needs, unless a trusting relationship is first built.

Activities that were found to be least effective for Disconnected Families included:

- Providing insufficient information about what services are available and what they do. This leads to a lack of trust and feelings of shame and embarrassment for families. To avoid these feelings, parents and children do not engage with the RSAS service or the school.
- Trying to engage families in conversation about attendance and school, before building a trusting relationship.
- Offering a service that has not considered the needs of families whose needs may differ from others in the community (for example, those who are not in the predominately Clan Group, those who live further outside of town, or those who are relatively new to community).

Table 11: What demotivates Disconnected Families explained using the CMO configuration

Context (situation)	Mechanise (leads to)	Outcome (what happens)
I don't understand what the RSAS staff do, they have never told me who they are or what they are here for...	I don't trust the RSAS staff...	...I am not sending my children anywhere with RSAS staff.
The RSAS staff say they will come pick up my child every day. We have her ready but they don't come to get her...	I'm confused about when the RSAS service should be collecting my child...	...I'm not going to use the RSAS service to send my child to school because I can't rely on them.

## Complex Life Events

### What motivates and supports attendance for families with Complex Needs

In addition to the predisposing contextual factors already identified for the different family types, families experiencing Complex Life Events have a range of issues that can impact their motivation to send children to school. Many of these issues are extremely complex, and require dedicated and specialist agencies dealing with their specific issues (for example, drug and alcohol services or a mental health professional). For these families, RSAS works best as a referral pathway, helping to link families to the support they need.

Families experiencing Complex Life Events are best engaged through a supportive and non-judgmental manner, asking open questions and listening to what is happening within the family. They are more likely to take advice from people who demonstrate real empathy toward them and who help them to access appropriate support. Most families experiencing Complex Life Events are more strongly influenced by people who have authority and cultural standing and who offer helpful and practical advice, without making them feel shame. Families are more likely to use RSAS services when they know what support is available for them and support is accessible when they are ready to accept it.

RSAS staff can go a long way in helping families experiencing Complex Life Events if staff engage with the family early on in a supportive, non-judgemental way to refer them to the right service. Early but appropriate interventions are important. This is because the longer families are without specialist support, the harder it is for them to change their behaviour in the long term. Ultimately issues can grow more complex with time. This

has repercussions for school attendance, as the habit of not going also gets reinforced with time.

Finally, just because a family may be experiencing Complex Life Events, does not mean that RSAS cannot help them, except to offer a referral to another service. Families experiencing Complex Life Events may (like everyone else) have days where they just need a little bit of extra help to get kids to school. By really listening to what their concerns are, RSAS can also help with a range of immediate short term issues. For example, we heard one mother tell us how she wanted to be proud of her child and did not want them to behave badly but she didn't know how to manage their behaviour without violence. The RSAS staff taught her how to deal with her children's behavioural issues without resorting to violence. This empowered her and made her feel happy in her parenting skills and she was not feeling sad about getting angry with her children anymore.

Activities that were found to be most effective for families experiencing Complex Life Events included:

- Employing staff who are capable, resourced and willing to deal with social problems that may affect families and children. When families believe staff have the required specialist skills, or have the positive attributes to build a rapport with the family, families are more trusting and more willing to engage.
- Referring families to appropriate support services, to help them address specific issues (for example, mental health support).
- Demonstrating empathy, patience and non-judgmental listening. When families truly believe someone is there to help them and their children, they are more likely to engage.
- Acknowledging that for some families, it may be very difficult to see school as a priority, until they have dealt with other issues. When offered support (or a referral for support) for other issues impacting the family, families may become more capable of thinking about school attendance, knowing they have a plan to deal with their others concerns (for example housing).

Table 12: What motivates families with complex needs explained using the CMO configuration

Context (situation)	Mechanise (leads to)	Outcome (what happens)
The RSAS staff taught me better ways to manage my children's behaviour.....the RSAS staff understand me and support me through difficult times....	... I feel like I know how to handle the situation now. Instead of smacking my children we sit down and talk about the difference between right and wrong ...	I work with the RSAS staff to get my children to school.
I didn't know how I was going to pay for my electricity and food this week, and then RSAS put me in contact with a financial counsellor...	...I feel less stressed, and am able to focus on other things like getting my kids to school...	... I am ready to talk to those RSAS people when they come back tomorrow to make a plan for me and my family.

### What de-motivates families experiencing Complex Life Events

Families experiencing Complex Life Events will often avoid any interaction where they perceive someone is ignoring them, or if they believe staff will be rude, antagonistic, threatening or judgmental. Families experiencing Complex Life Events are often unable to get their children to school and any additional negative feelings they may accrue if they feel shamed, or judged because of their complex situation will only make matters worse. Rather than improving attendance, this can increase non-attendance or antisocial behaviour. For example, families with addiction problems who have negative encounters (for example, if they are told off for not sending their children to school) can try to escape the pressures of life with more substance abuse – in turn, further reducing their capacity to cope and send their children to school. Another example is that if a parent is feeling shamed because their child has dirty clothes and skin, they are unlikely to discuss the cause of the issue, which may be homelessness. They won't ask for help addressing the issue, because they will fear they will be further shamed. When families experience shame they will often avoid situations where they

fear they will be embarrassed or must talk about their issues, decreasing capacity to get their children to school.

Given that many families experiencing Complex Life Events often have limited capacity to address a range of issue relating to non-attendance, they will be unlikely to respond to most of the day-to-day services offered by RSAS, until they have access to additional support. For these families, it is important that RSAS continue to offer support, positive engagement, including non-judgemental advice, and referrals to other specialist support services. When people try to force families experiencing Complex Life Events to do things they are not comfortable with, or ready for, they further disengage. However, they will be more likely to ask for help if they feel like they have someone to talk to who will listen and help them without being judgemental or shaming them further.

Activities that were found to be least effective for families experiencing Complex Life Events included:

- Dismissing a family's broader concerns, and insisting they only focus on getting children to school. When families feel overwhelmed, they may not have the capacity to even think about school, until some of their other concerns are addressed. RSAS staff do not always have the specialist skills required to address these concerns, but can be an effective referral pathway, if they listen to what a family needs and provide friendly advice on how and where they can get support.
- Shaming, or telling off. Families experiencing Complex Life Events often already have low self-esteem, and may already feel a lot of shame about their circumstances. If they are made to feel worse, in many cases, this will increase the severity of their issues (for example, may lead to someone with an alcohol dependency drinking more alcohol). It will also cause service avoidance and may reduce engagement with school or services.

Table 13: What demotivates families with complex needs explained using the CMO configuration

Context (situation)	Mechanise (leads to)	Outcome (what happens)
I am sad, so have been drinking a lot at the moment, and can't seem to stop. The RSAS worker told me this wasn't good enough and I need to just get my kids to school...	...I feel ashamed and think I am a bad parent, but I just need to get help to stop being sad. I can't get my kids to school even if I try...now I feel more sad.	...I'm going to avoid the RSAS team all together.
My family has been staying with relatives and on people's couches. I tried to talk the RSAS worker about my housing situation, but they just told me I can use the bus to get my kids to school if I want...	...I feel overwhelmed by all of the things going on in my life. I can't think about school right now...	... I won't send my kids to school, until my other problems are worked out.



## 2.5 Common responses to RSAS activities observed across all family types

The research has shown that different types of families respond to the same activity in different ways. However, researchers also found that there were six common enablers and barriers which most families had in common. For example, most families across all family types indicated they were more likely to respond positively to RSAS when the 'right person' was in the job. It was also much more likely families would send children to school if regular attendance was a widely accepted and demonstrated community norm. Some negative influences were also common across all family types – for example, all families were less likely to send kids to school if services were not delivered consistently (e.g. the bus did not run at the same time every day) or if they felt their children would not be safe at school. Below is a summary of the six common school attendance experiences shared by all family types. Most of these are consistent with the findings of the earlier community case studies.

### 1. Families are more likely to engage with RSAS staff who are the right cultural fit

When parents respect the RSAS worker (or can deal with them due to cultural protocols), this opened many avenues to get children to school. However, having one RSAS staff able to gain respect from the entire community is a difficult thing to do, because people from the various camps, skin groups, clans and languages have different views on who the right person is. What is right for one person might not be right for another. For example, in one community one parent said it would be a good idea if the RSAS staff were recent graduates. This way they could communicate the benefits of education and relate to the children. In another community, a parent said the RSAS staff member should be an Elder male, as it was likely that the younger boys would listen respectfully to them and try to role model their behaviour. This shows that different support strategies 'role modelling' or 'cultural authority' are needed for different families.

Further, some parents see RSAS workers as good at certain aspects of their job (e.g. pick-ups) but not others (e.g. liaising with school or handling difficult children). Indeed, parents occasionally remarked that the RSAS service needed to employ different people for different purposes. Therefore, it became clear that not every RSAS staff member can work with every parent. Not all RSAS staff have the same requisite authority to work with every parent. Where RSAS employed a diverse team meeting the needs of all the people in a diverse community, families were much more likely to engage with the service.

A common thread that permeated through all discussions however, was that the person had to be a local person that was recognised and known by the community. This gave validity to the service and made the community feel like the government supports local job creation. Regardless of who the specific person is, their credibility as the appropriate person for this job is what is important to parents.

'Right fit' provides:

- overt or subtle blessing of authority of RSAS and its aims
- reinforcement of the message that education is important
- basic service delivery improvements (because the 'right person' best understands the needs of the parents and community and understands its dynamics in real time).

In short, the 'right' person allows parents to feel that the RSAS staff is more than just a 'bus driver'. The status of the RSAS worker within the community is a key factor in determining to what extent parents, children and RSAS staff can engage with one another, communicate effectively and develop strategies for getting children to school.

### 2. Families will avoid using RSAS services if the 'wrong person' is in the job

In those instances, where a person has been hired for the job but not considered 'local', some families can feel that RSAS is just another thing the government is forcing on them. This prevented a sense of ownership and works against the spirit of the place-based model. Not only can the community feel devalued and disempowered, but it stymies the potential for effective dialogue between RSAS staff and parents/children.



Furthermore, some parents/families feel those 'foreign' employees haven't always got the community's best interest at heart. Other practical examples of who many families identified as the 'wrong' person include those who:

- are not able to communicate with students because they don't speak their language
- are not able to speak to certain children, due to cultural reasons e.g. skin group, clan relationships, gender roles.
- do not know where children or families are because they haven't inside community knowledge e.g. family having moved or being away for a funeral or ceremony
- do not have the right authority and therefore are unable to influence children's behaviour.

### **3. Families felt RSAS was only effective when invited 'inside the gate' of people's homes or the school**

When parents feel RSAS staff work well with families and teachers, better outcomes are achieved. Families noted that being permitted 'inside the gate', either at school or in the family home, was a key contributor to the success of RSAS. These outcomes come not only in the form of children engaging with the basic RSAS service and getting to school, but also through things such as finding truant students or RSAS staff working with the school and families on behaviour/attendance/achievement. Where evident, parents view these aspects as making an overall impact on not only attendance but attainment.

Indeed, the literature suggests that parents are the biggest influencer on a child's school attendance and RSAS ability to work with parents may be the most effective leverage point to improve attendance. It is important to note that the RSAS worker's ability to work well with parents can only happen if the parent welcomes them to this role. Families demonstrated a strong aversion to RSAS activities they viewed as overstepping this invitation, particularly where parents have not given consent for RSAS staff to get involved in their domestic affairs. Some basic examples of how parents said they knew RSAS staff worked well with them (and therefore would be more likely to invite them inside the gate) included when they saw RSAS staff:

- knocking on doors, rather than going straight inside someone's home
- speaking to families kindly and showing they are not there to judge, punish or mock
- genuinely listening to them, taking their unique situations into account and not just forcing solutions on them.

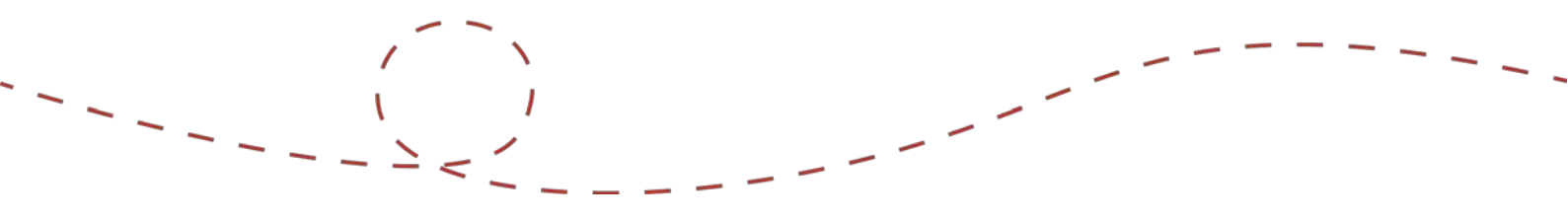
Conversely, families indicated there were some feelings or experiences that meant they would be less likely to welcome RSAS inside the gate. This included if they felt RSAS staff would:

- speak aggressively to families
- shame and embarrass family members
- enter homes without permission.

Parents who know RSAS staff are involved in school going-ons (e.g. events, breakfasts, sports, education) see that they have access to educators. In turn, they experience how this access improves communication channels and agency for change.

Researchers also found that RSAS is hampered when staff are not invited into the school. This hinders communication between all parties and, therefore, their ability to develop informed and effective attendance strategies. Families indicated that the reasons why a RSAS worker may not be invited into the school often stemmed from a teacher or principal not being engaged with the RSAS program or the broader community.

Further, the support strategies of the RSAS need to work in collaboration, complement and reinforce the





experience that parents/carers and students felt or perceived of school. If messaging from RSAS staff about the concept of going to school conflicted with what the parents/carers and students experience of going to school, then even when RSAS was delivering a consistent service, it was limited in its ability to improve attendance. For example, if the RSAS staff told families that even though their child had missed a lot of school they could still catch up and they would be supported to do so, but then the school was unable to offer transition support when the student re-entered the classroom, it was difficult to sustain a long-term improvement to attendance for that student. Actions of RSAS staff needed to be backed up by actions of the school including, but not limited to, ensuring the school was a fun, engaging, inviting and culturally safe place.

#### **4. Safety matters, and families will protect their children from harm (real or perceived)**

While some families had greater levels of fear than others, a strong protective instinct was evident in most family types and most families indicated their children's safety and wellbeing was a critical factor in decision-making about attendance. This played out differently in different families, but children's safety was a consistent priority, and something that all families believed RSAS had a role in ensuring. Some families prioritised short term safety and happiness (did their children enjoy school and were they safe from bullying?) while others focused on longer term safety and happiness (would their children be able to get a job in the future?). Depending on the way RSAS engaged with parents around these issues, protective instincts could be either a barrier to attendance or something that could be leveraged to improve attendance.

Sadly, a dominant theme found in this research was community and youth violence, as well as teasing and bullying (physical and emotional). Sometimes this occurred at school, on the streets or even on the RSAS bus service. Bullying was a significant issue in all communities and frequently mentioned in the conversations had with families and community members.

When bullying at school occurs, some parents want to protect their children from it so they allow them to stay home. These parents feel scared for their children so they allow them to stay away from school. The desire to see their children happy and smiling and not upset is more important than the desire for education. Furthermore, some parents are not coping with children's antisocial behaviours, or when their children are peer pressured into antisocial behaviour. They feel helpless and not able to stop the behaviour. They are not able to protect their children from bad influences and look to the RSAS staff to work with the children. Some parents felt that RSAS staff were not suitably trained to deal with these types of behaviours, which often leads to the status quo and school non-attendance. Where families saw RSAS helping to manage anti-social behaviour in a safe way, families were more likely to engage with the service, and send children to school.

#### **5. Norms matter and families' attendance behaviours will be impacted by peer behaviour**

Parents who know their children like going to school to socialise with friends are more inclined to try and get their children to school and therefore, they use the RSAS service. In fact, many parent/carers of children who were regular school-goers said their children did not like staying home because it was boring and they'd rather be with their friends. Close, positive friendships and fun activities are therefore facilitators for school attendance. From a qualitative perspective, this also tended to be more the case among younger children. Lastly, among those children who wanted to spend time with their peers, their parents also spoke of the pride the children had in things they had done at school. Going to school because you want to spend time with your friends is a precursor to feelings of pride around educational achievement. This feeling of pride was true for the students, and typically true of the parents/carers of those children – who were happy their children enjoyed school and were learning. In sum, children who go to school to spend time with friends end up doing well at school, which leads to educational achievement and additional positive associations with school. Where RSAS could contribute to the fun of going to school (for example, offering fun events) or show families some of the fun things happening at school, it was more positively received by families.

Children also go to school because of their parent's positive influence. This often occurred if parents:



- were involved in school activities or volunteered at the school
- had an education themselves and saw the benefits of it
- believed children would be able to find employment as the result of education
- were working and habitually woke early themselves.

Because parents show an interest in what the child is doing, this makes the child feel important and more inclined to attend. Social norms around the value of education are also implicitly or explicitly communicated to the child. Furthermore, the habitual act of waking up and going to school reinforces the good habit of attendance. It can also increase academic performance. In short, children will go to school because it is 'the done thing' in their family and their parents expect it. And the more they go, the easier it is for them to continue going and do well. As such, it is important to most families, that they be invited and encouraged to participate in RSAS activities as well as activities at the school.

In those regions where families felt the community has input into the way the RSAS is delivered, families advised they were much more likely to support education and engage with RSAS – for example, using the bus run because there is no shame associated with using it. However, where families felt the community had not had input into the RSAS attendance plan, they were much less likely to use it and there was more stigma, shame and embarrassment associated with using RSAS services. In this instances, families were more likely to find their own way to get their children to school – though this may be more inconvenient and reliant on others for help – or not send children to school at all.

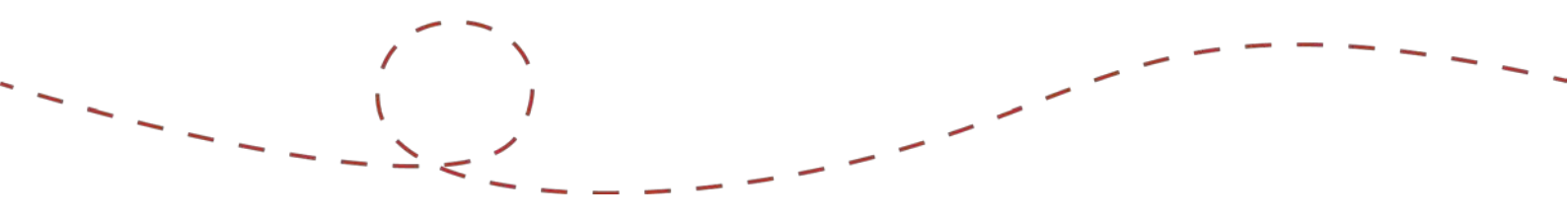
#### **6. Families respond to rewards and incentives – when they are done right**

Many families were aware that RSAS uses a “carrot” mechanism to get children to school, through offering rewards and incentives and promotions to motivate children to attend. Families advised that giving children incentives for school attendance or good behaviour encouraged school attendance. These incentives were almost always spoken about as a material incentive, such as a bicycle or trip.

Researchers also found the initial desire for the material prizes can wear thin and other psychological needs such as a sense of belonging, pride, praise, self-identity and satisfaction with achievement need to be fostered as a more important component of the reward (both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards).

Whilst most parents wanted to see their child receive a prize, in some cases it could cause jealousy and fighting in a family. Where the expectation of a prize is well established, it can cause frustration and disappointment if the equity of distribution is questioned. For example, some families felt their children had missed out on a reward which they should have received. In this example, the rewards could demotivate certain families, because they did not feel rewards were fair, achievable or equitable. It was also hard to see the same people consistently getting rewarded for perfect attendance if smaller improvements in attendance were not also recognised.

In the five communities studied there were little or no examples of motivations through rewards for the parents. Many of the participants indicated that rewards for the whole of community or to benefit a family might be an effective way to reward attendance.



### 3. Conclusion

This research found that the RSAS place-based framework allowed great flexibility, which when effectively utilised, worked well for a range of families to support them to get their children to school. However, when RSAS was applied as a “one size fits all approach”, it was less effective, because it did not account for the very different needs of families in different circumstances.

The families in this study demonstrated key strengths that can be supported to help get their children to school. RSAS can work to families’ strengths by:

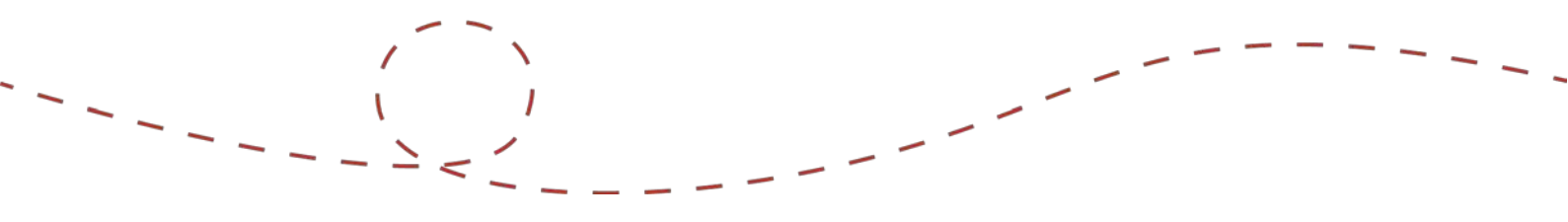
- Reinforcing ‘**Committed Families**’ aspirations, goals and pride whilst offering practical support so they can get their children to school.
- Demonstrating to ‘**Protective Families**’ that RSAS also want to keep children safe at school and going to and from school.
- Advocating for cultural respect and safety to reassure ‘**Unsure Families**’ that all learning, both mainstream and traditional education, is important.
- Helping ‘**Disconnected Families**’ feel like they belong in the community and that all children are supported to have an education.

School attendance can be improved by considering how to identify the four types of families in each community and exploring the specific key influencers of school attendance for each group. By identifying a family’s contextual factors, RSAS staff may be better able to consider what works and what doesn’t for each family and build more tailored support strategies for families and family groups.

The physical and social environments within a family, or even within a community, can also change over time. When changes occur, a family may change from one ‘type’ to another. There might even be a lot of families shifting to different family types (e.g. a new principal or change in community clan composition with new families might make people feel differently about their relationship with the school or the community). When this occurs, multiple families might need the same support strategies through these transitions, or some families may react differently and have significant changes to their individual support needs. By working with the families, and understanding their changing circumstances over time, services are better positioned to offer support that will lead to an increase in school attendance.

Families experiencing Complex Life Events may require a range of support services from different providers who are trained to do this specialised work. This research found that many parents believed that RSAS was unable to support an increase in school attendance for families experiencing Complex Life Events, unless these families also had access to specialist support services. When it worked best, RSAS was an effective referral and coordination point for these families, but only when staff were appropriately trained to work with families, were knowledgeable about the services, and were seen by families as ‘the right person for the job’. When RSAS staff were not trained to work with families, they were said to be harsh or critical of families experiencing Complex Life Events. This can have a negative impact on actual attendance outcomes, now and into the future. Better collaboration with and advocacy for other specialised service providers may see RSAS as a good culturally appropriate referral process, with caveats about how this is done so they are not seen as the “watch dogs” or “reporters” to authorities.

Finally, this research also found some elements of the RSAS which were effective for most families. These might be considered to be good practice principles which can inform the basic service offering.



Below are a number of suggestions for future research or further analysis that may be of benefit for practice improvement in the RSAS.

1. Further examination of outcome patterns.

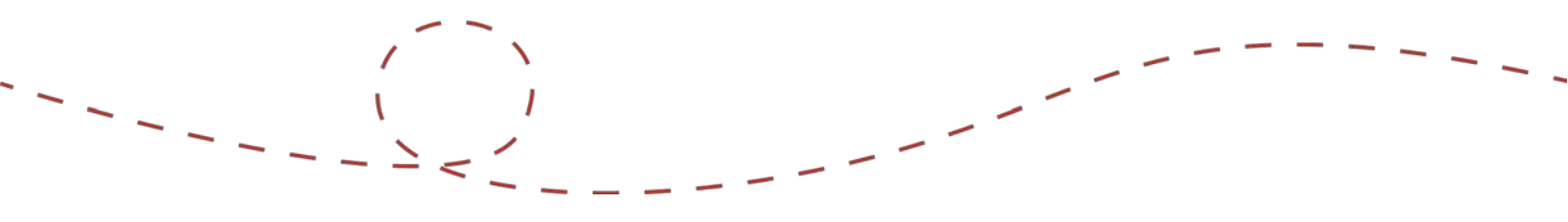
- Some participants in this research consented for their children's school attendance records to be obtained and analysed with their survey data. If data linkage could be undertaken with access to individual families school attendance outcomes it could provide stronger evidence for a fully realist enquiry.
- Schools to regularly identify and provide 'bands' of attendance, such as the ones noted in this report (attending most of the time, some of the time, or rarely attending, with definitions of the terms consistent between schools).

2. Further examination of context.

- The interplay between the parents/carers and the RSAS staff in the context of the community environment and school environment was not included as an additional layering to the four family groups. These environmental, service and institutional contexts could be explored further to provide further understanding of each of the family groups for a fully realist enquiry.

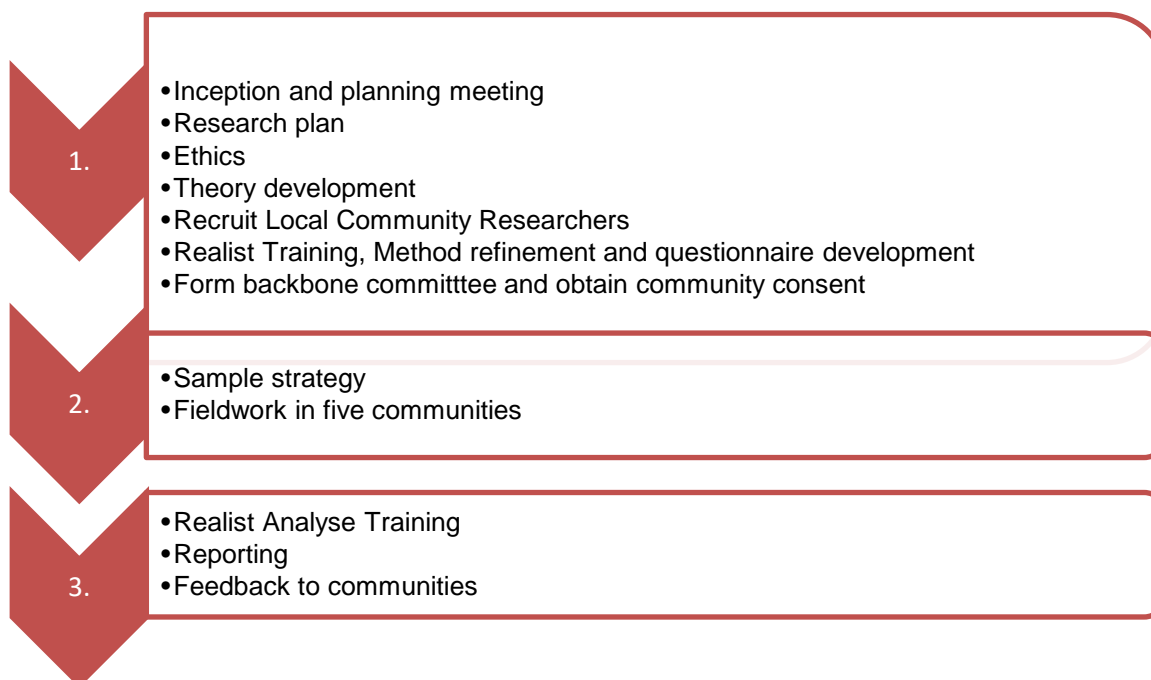
3. A diagnostic checklist of the four family types.

- Development of a tool that RSAS officers can use to help identify family types drawing on the summary of MAPS contextual factors influencing school attendance (Table 3). This would require development, testing and validation that it can accurately classify a family type.
- Capacity-building in the RSAS teams to enable them to use the information they collect from a diagnostic tool - and likely refine the tool and their learning over time - to build a better evidence base. The administration of the tool in itself may provide a good engagement strategy for listening to parents/carers and hearing about their situation.



## APPENDIX A - Methodology

The research included the following components.



### Local community researchers recruited

Through our contacts and connections, the communities were approached to discuss who would be most appropriate from their perspective to undertake the role, and who were the most experienced in research to manage the complexities of realist interviewing. A male and a female community researcher was desired; however, a male researcher was not available in two sites. There was a female Aboriginal team leader in each site.

Table 14: Number of local researchers by gender and community

Community	Local Male Researcher	Local Female Researcher
A	2	1
B	0	2
C	0	1
D	1	1
E	1	1
<b>Total</b>	4	6

## Theory development & Literature Review

Initial theories were developed from what is known from existing literature. This short literature review was used to help formulate our research questions and theory of change. The literature review is in Appendix B.

## Community consent

Ipsos/Winangali researchers worked with our local research networks and connections to negotiate access and consent in the communities visited. This task involved obtaining letter(s) of agreement from the designated or respected leaders of each community to be involved. Copies of these letters were presented in our ethics applications. PMC also worked through regional networks and the funded RSAS organisations to assist with increasing awareness and support for the evaluation.

## Ethics

Ethics was sought for this project by AIATSIS. It was granted on 19/06/2017 (HREC Reference number: E054 – 01052017).

## Realist training

To develop a research plan that would enable the project to incorporate a realist approach, a three-day training session was held. This was led by Professor Gill Westthorp, a globally recognised realist expert, and Associate Professor Emma Williams, an established realist expert and expert working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The training took place at Charles Darwin University in Darwin 7 to 9 June 2017.

## Sample strategy

There were five communities selected based on a variation in service provision, school attendance, geographic location and intersection with other government programs and interventions. The following table provides an overview of the communities sampled.

Table 15: Overview of communities sampled

Site	RSAS Provider	Number of students enrolled 2016	Attendance Rate 2016	Brief description
<b>A</b>	Indigenous owned organisation (also CDP provider)	350-400	58% (9% attending at least 90% of the time)	<p>Approx. population 1,200 people with approximately 88% identifying as Indigenous.</p> <p>Various languages are spoken across the 13 or more clan groups living in and around the community. The population of the community (and subsequently school enrolments) vary seasonally, with high levels of community mobility. Alcohol is banned, there are significant safety issues in the community and no permanent police presence.</p> <p>This school provides education for students from early years to senior years.</p> <p>The RSAS team focusses on positive messaging, to ensure a slow cultural shift of acceptance by family and community of the RSAS team and school more generally. The RSAS team meets weekly with the school principal, and team members are also members of the School Council Committee.</p>



Site	RSAS Provider	Number of students enrolled 2016	Attendance Rate 2016	Brief description
<b>B</b>	Indigenous owned organisation (also CDP provider)	250-300	71% (29% attending at least 90% of the time)	<p>The population is approximately 850 people with approximately 86% identifying as Indigenous.</p> <p>The population fluctuates during different cultural and climatic seasons and there is a significant housing shortage. There are 14 languages (including English) spoken across thirteen clan groups in and around the community. Alcohol is banned and there are significant safety issues in the community.</p> <p>This school provides education for students from early years to senior years.</p> <p>The RSAS team is staffed by senior Elders and leaders, men and women. RSAS is focussed on addressing community safety issues which impact attendance and reducing the impact of mobility on school attendance.</p>
<b>C</b>	School	200-250	72% (with 30% attending at least 90% of the time)	<p>The population is approximately 1250 people, with approximately 94% identifying as Indigenous.</p> <p>English is the main language spoken. It is estimated there are around 300 school aged children in the community, but many are not enrolled.</p> <p>The school offers pre-primary to Year 10 schooling.</p> <p>A number of parents volunteer to work in classrooms with teachers and students promoting local cultural activities. The RSAS team delivers a morning bus run and then follows up with the families who have children absent. Teachers also do home visits framed around positive parenting engagement.</p>
<b>D</b>	School	100-150	85% (with 52% attending at least 90% of the time)	<p>The population is approximately 2000 people, with approximately 95% identifying as Indigenous.</p> <p>English is the main language spoken. The community has a history of frontier violence, Aboriginal deaths and forced relocation resulting in intergenerational trauma.</p> <p>The school offers grade prep to Year 6 (primary school) with most secondary aged students travelling to surrounding communities for school, although there is a small independent school available in community.</p> <p>Most of the RSAS team members take a dual role in supporting attendance: they help the community get kids to school and help the school work with kids who need extra support. RSAS team members also visit the families of students who aren't at school to see what they can do to help.</p>
<b>E</b>	Non-Indigenous owned private company	200-250	71% (with 30% attending at least 90% of the time)	<p>The population is approximately 1750 people, with approximately 17% identifying as Indigenous.</p> <p>The community is extremely diverse, with around 50 different cultures represented (including a number of Aboriginal family groups and clans). The School employs an Aboriginal Education Team who work with students and also supports teachers to understand culture and build parental involvement in school.</p> <p>RSAS delivers a range of locally tailored student engagement strategies (breakfast program, programs to build self-esteem, and remove the stigma of running late or asking for help). However, the RSAS team has also identified it is struggling with family engagement strategies trialled.</p>

Our sample strategy included one week of data collection in each of the five communities. Open dialogues were the preferred research tools for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people determined through the participatory process. Due to the collaborative way research is conducted, our sample reached a broad cross section of parents and carers of children/young people with good and poor school attendance. It was not a random selection process and we aimed to get a good balance of those performing the desired behaviour of getting their children to school and those who were not therefore conclusions about prevalence of behaviours cannot be calculated from this qualitative study.

Overlaid on to this broad sample of parents and carers, we sought to include representation of age/gender, camps, clan and family groups across the community, among other things.

In total 114 interviews in community were completed.

### Fieldwork (conducting realist interviews)

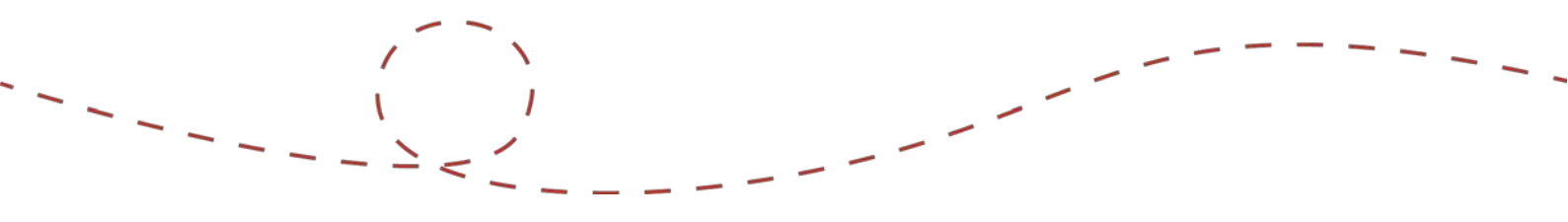
As stipulated earlier research was conducted into five communities, spending one week in each community with one researcher and two local community researchers. Having already been trained in a realist approach, our researchers obtained insights into the underlying processes and factors explaining and driving change. The main method used was in-depth interviews combined with a storytelling approach. Researchers observed the RSAS whilst in community using an ethnographic approach.

- **In-depth interviews:** Conducting qualitative interviews uncovered useful insights and allowed for a relatively free exchange of information compared with group discussions.
- **Telling the story of RSAS:** Vignettes are a powerful way to enable participants to describe outcomes, changes in attitudes, behaviours and norms which all helped to identify the mechanisms of change. The use of small illustrations (found later in the Appendix C and D) provided a powerful story to inform the evaluation.
- **Ethnography:** While in community, our researchers observed actual behaviour for an extended length of time, capturing all the interactions and activities involved in daily life and school attendance.

Considering the cultural diversity within Indigenous Australia and the heterogeneity of the locations in this study, a single research approach was not used. Each location required the researcher to develop the methods and tools to undertake the research that would work in each community (for example, visual diagrams to represent various concepts, and questions which could be altered where a direct translation was not possible).

### Realist Workshop & Analysis

Following on from the fieldwork in the five communities, researchers participated in a teleconference workshop. The workshop was aimed to ensure participatory research methods were utilised and geared towards planning and conducting the research with those people whose lived experience and actions were under study. The key themes, issues, patterns and points of contention that arose during the fieldwork were addressed. This process of immersion in the data helped us to isolate key themes, points of view, trends and patterns in what participants said. The process involved multiple team members independently analysing the same material, ensuring that the resulting analyses were robust and not subjective and able to withstand critical scrutiny.



## Reporting

Reporting included:

- a community field report including how research was conducted in each community.
- an interim report after fieldwork in two communities.
- a second interim report after fieldwork was conducted in the third community.
- a report on the realist training.

This report is the consolidated report, which aggregates the findings into one evaluation summary. This report was reviewed by the researchers prior to submission to ensure that the findings reflect the differences and similarities found across the communities.

## Feedback to communities

An important ethical element of the project is to report the findings of the research back to each participating community. This information will assist communities with their future planning. Considering the small number of participants and the requirement to keep the research confidential, individual community reports were not produced. However, the aggregated findings will be delivered back to the community via the RSAS teleconferences with local community researchers in attendance. This will involve providing a brief presentation on the report and discussion on how the report could be used by the community for community development and planning purposes. The format and date for feedback will be negotiated with individual communities but the full participation of local researchers in the feedback process has been budgeted.

## Presentation of Findings

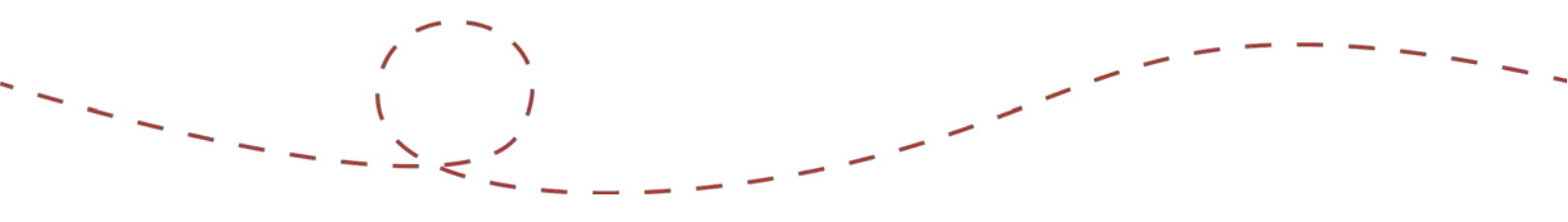
The findings will be presented to key stakeholders in Canberra by the core project team.

## Animation

A short animation of the evaluation is being delivered. The purpose of this is to present essential findings in an engaging manner for a variety of audiences.

**Qualitative segmentation** allows for efficiencies ('who to target'), helps understand what the five family groups are doing and why, and creates understanding of the gaps between what different families do and what it will take to change their behaviour. Understanding parents/carers who do perform the desired behaviours (getting children to school) is just as important as understanding those who don't so that successful support strategies are designed. In terms of the RSAS which focuses on behaviour change there are three considerations for the use of public resources in designing support strategies:

- 1) **Segment Priority** - Target those in most need of support strategies (not enrolled or not attending at all) because of the greater likelihood of their need for help and support services and therefore greater propensity to improve health and wellbeing outcomes as well as educational outcomes for children. However, this may be outside the scope and capability of the RSAS and be better addressed by other interventions or services.



- 2) **Segment Size** - In terms of efficient use of resources it may be more important to focus on the largest group with the one support strategy to get more “bang for your buck” (that is more change at a community level to increase attendance). Quantifying the target market for RSAS is important for the segmentation analysis however was not part of this research project. That is, we don’t know how big each of the family types are in each community.
- 3) **Segment Activation** - Focusing on those least resistant to change may be a way of ensuring the most effective use of resources. That is, perhaps just improving the quality of current service delivery and strengthening those support strategies for those families that just need RSAS to work for them to change their behaviour.

Using the research findings, support strategies can be tailored to be most effective by presenting receptive messaging in tone and channels that are best understood in the five family types. Further considerations are outlined later in this report. However, based on the findings of this evaluation and behavioural science, several basic considerations for the support strategies, each relating to the five forces that could shape school attendance behaviour better have been proposed as mechanisms for change.



## APPENDIX B – Literature review

There is evidence from a wide range of sources that Indigenous students have markedly lower school participation, retention, and success rates than their non-Indigenous counterparts.<sup>8</sup> To extend on current understandings, and to incorporate earlier learnings around school attendance into our own research, a short literature review that examines the characteristics and patterns of school attendance and reasons for poor attendance among Indigenous students was conducted.<sup>9</sup> The literature review also identifies programmes and strategies which are reported to lead to improved school attendance of Indigenous students or improved participation in, and successful outcomes from, schooling. Of interest to us is an analysis of literature relating to the psychological and protective factors that impact school attendance within an Indigenous context. From our other work in the Indigenous space we know that factors such as teachers, a school climate, family and community support and role models can be massively influential.<sup>10</sup>

### Situational analysis

The Remote School Attendance Strategy is designed to lift school attendance levels in remote communities through employment of local School Attendance Supervisors (SASs) and School Attendance Officers (SAOs) who work with schools, families and children to ensure students go to school every day possible.

The theory of change underpinning RSAS is that employing local community members will encourage greater community participation. Therefore, more parents and carers will be empowered to get their children to school and will become involved in school attendance strategies. It also acknowledges that local people are the best placed to solve local issues, using their knowledge and expertise of local contexts. As such, SAOs and SASs are recruited and employed locally to ensure local people are more involved in finding and agreeing on solutions to poor attendance.

Attendance has been clearly linked to other outcomes, including improved literacy and numeracy. RSAS delivers a range of strategies to improve attendance with the intention of improving engagement, retention, Year 12 completion rates and employment outcomes in the long term.

While it is unclear what the long-term benefits of RSAS will be, there is evidence of short term gain in attendance in some sites. Between 2014 and 2015, these gains were most evident, with a two percentage point increase across all RSAS schools when comparing Semester 1 2015 with Semester 1 2013. In 2016, improvements slowed and the initial gains in attendance were not sustained, although attendance has remained higher than pre-RSAS rates in most sites. In Semester 1 2016, around 60 per cent of RSAS schools had increased average attendance rates when compared with Semester 1 2013 attendance rates. Early analysis of attendance data in similar schools shows that the downward trend in attendance in RSAS schools may be part of a broader downward trend of remote Indigenous attendance. Although these early findings are not yet conclusive, they suggest RSAS may have slowed already decreasing attendance, but not stopped it.

Anecdotal evidence provides two contrasting stories of RSAS. Firstly, it indicates that RSAS has been

<sup>8</sup> Nola Purdie. "Positive Self-Identity for Indigenous Students and its Relationship to School Outcomes." Journal of the Aboriginal Studies Association (2003).

<sup>9</sup> Example: Jan Gray, Quentin Beresford. "Aboriginal non-attendance at school: Revisiting the debate." The Australian Educational Researcher. April 2002, Volume 29, Issue 1, pp 27–42

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Martin. "Motivational Psychology for the Education of Indigenous Australian Students." Australian Journal of Indigenous Education

successful in increasing the attendance of students who are already going to school some or most of the time. Unverified reports suggest that RSAS is assisting families who require low or moderate levels of support, such as transport to school, material assistance (e.g. purchasing school uniforms) or limited mentoring (e.g. having an older person to check in with). However, it appears that transitioning severely disengaged students (attending one day or less a week) back to the classroom has proved more difficult. Multiple and complex issues underpinning long term disengagement cannot be fixed by RSAS alone. Substance misuse, family violence, gambling, physical and mental health, disability and wellbeing issues, housing and homelessness, long term unemployment, and limited literacy and numeracy skills are some of the complex issues requiring specialised interventions. It is estimated half of all school aged children are disengaged from education in some RSAS communities.

Secondly, and perhaps in contradiction to the first example, anecdotal evidence also suggests that when disengaged students are supported by RSAS to return to the classroom, if not properly supported they can have a disruptive influence on other students, and can negatively influence the attendance of other students. This can cause an increase in attendance for lower band attendance, but have a subsequent decrease in middle and higher band attendance, thus resulting in little change in the overall attendance rate.

Because 'bands of attendance' data is not available for many RSAS schools, it is difficult to verify which cohorts of students (attending most of the time, some of the time, or rarely attending) are changing patterns of attendance when there are changes in the data, and therefore which, if either, of the above outcomes are occurring.

## Enablers and barriers

From the literature and prior work, a series of barriers to change (and their corresponding enablers) that may be contributing to school attendance have been identified. The following table outlines a list of contextual and circumstantial barriers or enablers of school attendance that can be further tested in the research.





Table 16: Enablers and barriers to attendance

	Internal / Personal context		External / Environmental context	
Target area	Motivation	Ability	Physical Influences	Social Influences
Student	Level of identity with culture Behavioural issues Substance abuse Self esteem Career aspirations Expectations of employment or education attainment Attitudes towards school staff Attitudes towards RSAS staff	Gender Age High aptitude for learning / change their environment Social and emotional wellbeing Health	Housing Transport Access to food daily	Supportive family Feel like they belong Cultural connection Intergenerational welfare Working role models Cultural norms Cultural obligations
Family	Attitudes, values and beliefs about education Aspirations for child Expectations of employment or education attainment Attitudes towards school staff Attitudes towards RSAS staff Parental Efficacy and Empowerment	Gender Age Educational attainment Work history Current employment status Parental coping	Housing Transport Access to food daily	Poor family functioning or cohesion in family structure Cultural norms Cultural obligations Role models
Community	Stated goals and values about attendance Attitudes towards school staff Attitudes towards RSAS staff	Governance and capacity of leaders and decision makers	Connected to country Access traditional land	Social cohesion Cultural diversity Social norms
Schools	Relationship with community Attitudes towards students Attitudes towards parents Attitudes towards RSAS staff Recognise indigenous culture and history	Staff's cultural competency Communication tools and skills Consistency across whole of school	Multiple schools / inconsistency in approaches Hygiene facilities	Inclusive environment Safe environment Social environment

## Parental aspirations

Analysis of the data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY) has shown that parental aspirations influence children's educational and occupational aspirations. While the LSAY research examines educational aspirations and outcomes of children who are in secondary school, children's attitudes

and values are being influenced by their parents from a much earlier age (Changing Minds 2014)<sup>11</sup>. As discussed in the Wave 3 report in this series (Facia 2012), primary carers in Footprints in Time consider their child's education to be important and many expressed hopes that their children will go further in their education than they did themselves. While only about one-third of primary carers in the Footprints in Time study had completed Year 12, and less than 10 percent had a university qualification in 2012, an overwhelming majority said that they expected their child to at least finish secondary school. One in three hoped their child would get a university degree. In Wave 3, primary carers of the older cohort were asked whether they had liked school as a child. Of those asked, 88.5 per cent said that they liked primary school a lot or a bit. Interestingly, parents who disliked primary school were just as likely to attain a higher qualification or degree as parents who had liked primary school. Primary carers of children in both Footprints in Time and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) were asked how far they thought their child would go in their education.

A review of the literature by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) demonstrates how parental involvement works in its influence indirectly through shaping the child's self-concept as a learner and through setting high aspirations.

## Parental Involvement

Research by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003)<sup>12</sup> "consistently shows that:

- Parental involvement takes many forms including good parenting in the home, the provision of a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of constructive social and educational values and high aspirations relating to personal fulfilment and good citizenship, as well as contact with schools to share information, participation in school events, participation in the work of the school and participation in school governance.
- The extent and form of parental involvement is strongly influenced by family social class, maternal level of education, material deprivation, maternal psycho-social health and single parent status and, to a lesser degree, by family ethnicity.
- The extent of parental involvement diminishes as the child gets older and is strongly influenced at all ages by the child characteristically taking a very active mediating role.
- Parental involvement is strongly positively influenced by the child's level of attainment – the higher the level of attainment, the more parents get involved.
- The most important finding from the point of view of this review is that parental involvement in the form of 'at-home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment, even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation. In the primary age range the impact caused by different levels of parental involvement is much bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools. The scale of the impact is evident across all social classes and all ethnic groups.
- Other forms of parental involvement do not appear to contribute to the scale of the impact of 'at-home' parenting.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/the-screen-guide/t/changing-minds--the-inside-story-series-1-2014/33755/>

<sup>12</sup> Desforges, C, and Abouchaar, A. 2003, The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievements and Adjustment: A Literature Review. A report for the UK Department of Education and Skills: Queens Printer.

- Differences between parents in their level of involvement are associated with social class, poverty, health, and with parental perception of their role and their levels of confidence in fulfilling it. Some parents are put off by feeling put down by schools and teachers.”

## Reasons for nonattendance

Unsurprisingly the literature shows that there are many reasons for why students may not attend school, overlapping social, emotional, physical and environmental factors. However, the causes of non-attendance can be contested. For example, Gray and Partington write that parents and pupils tend to stress school-related factors as the main cause, yet staff in education jurisdictions and teachers tend to believe that parental attitudes and the home environment are more influential.<sup>13</sup>

Looking at the Indigenous-specific reasons for non-attendance, Biddle, Herbert and Schwab explain that most of these reasons relate to:

- a lack of recognition by schools of Indigenous culture and history
- failure to fully engage parents, carers and the community
- and ongoing disadvantage in many areas of the daily lives of Indigenous Australians.<sup>14</sup>

What is most likely is that the causes of non-attendance are constantly changing and thinking of it in any fixed or non-fluid way is likely to be unproductive. However, looking across countries, there is some consistency in the reasons that are generally presented for low school attendance. These reasons are available in more detail elsewhere, but a high level the typical causes of non-attendance include:

- lack of parents and carer support/value for education
- society insufficiently valuing education or providing appropriate support
- poor school teaching or absenteeism systems
- government curricula being unsuitable
- student issues relating to bullying, lack of career aspirations and low self-esteem
- inconsistent or confusing education jurisdiction or policies
- communities suffering from poverty, unemployment or poor facilities
- cultural issues e.g. gender imbalances, antisocial behaviour.<sup>15</sup>

The above is a complex set of circumstances that result in disadvantage across a range of life experiences. Consequently, addressing non-attendance is also a complex and contextual exercise.

<sup>13</sup> Gray J & Partington G 2003. School attendance and non-attendance. In: Beresford Q & Partington G (eds). Resistance and reform: Aboriginal youth and education. Perth: UWA Press.

<sup>14</sup> Biddle N, Hunter BH, & Schwab RG 2004. Mapping Indigenous educational participation. Discussion paper No. 267/2004. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra. Herbert J, Anderson L, Price, D & Stehbins C 1999. If they learn us right: Study of the factors affecting the attendance, suspension and exclusion of Aboriginal students in secondary schools. Sydney: Australian Centre for Equity through Education. Schwab RG 2001. If you have a dream, you make it happen: Approaches to maximising education engagement among young Indigenous students. Report prepared for the Research and Evaluation Branch, International Analysis and Evaluation Division, Department of Education, Science and Training, available at [http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school\\_education/publications\\_resources/profiles/maximising\\_educational\\_engagement.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/profiles/maximising_educational_engagement.htm)

<sup>15</sup> Purdie N, Buckley S. Issues Paper No 1 produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. September 2010. <http://www.aihw.gov.au/uploadedFiles/ClosingTheGap/Content/Publications/2010/ctg-ip01.pdf>

## Understanding attendance

As explained, the factors that lead to non-attendance are complex and contextual. Nevertheless, both Australian and international research commonly cite some common contributing factors: the individual, the family, the community and the school. If any of these factors (or indeed a combination of them) negatively impact children and inhibit their immediate learning environment, it is safe to assume that the reverse is true i.e. children who are motivated to learn, and have the social, physical and environmental conditions that support learning, will go to school. Taken further, researchers have emphasised the link between students' perceptions of school and their motivation, achievement and behaviour. Within an Indigenous context, Bourke and others suggest that Indigenous students will be more empowered in relation to their learning and feel connected to their school if involved in decision-making within the school.<sup>16</sup> Other attributes said to link Indigenous students to school attendance and educational outcomes include teacher quality and a curriculum that reflects the value of Indigenous culture. With that said, without the other necessary factors required for a supportive learning environment, even the best teachers with the most culturally relevant material will not help students who are unable to regularly attend.

## Actions or interventions

Research by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) on interventions to promote parental involvement reveals many approaches ranging from parent training programmes, through to initiatives to enhance home school links and on to programmes of family and community education. Evaluations of this very extensive activity reveal:

- there is a perceived increased need and an evident increase in demand for such support
- high levels of creativity and commitment are evident amongst providers and high levels of appreciation are recorded by clients.

Biddle (2014) discusses that 'to design policies that maximise the chances that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) students will attend school on a given day, it is important to have a detailed understanding of how Indigenous students make the decision about whether to attend.' The analysis of four data sets showed that on the attendance decisions of Indigenous students – The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC), and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) – there were three aspects of the school decision.

1. The relationship between past attendance and current academic outcomes,
2. Differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in patterns of attendance,
3. Indigenous-specific determinants of school attendance.

Biddle's analysis shows that, although there is strong evidence for the policy focus on school attendance, the current policy framework may be missing many of the factors that are driving actual behaviour.<sup>17</sup>

There are several different intervention functions in the Motivation, Ability, Physical and Social Context (MAPS) framework. These intervention functions are resourced by the RSAS programme. Each of these

<sup>16</sup> "Program boosts Indigenous school attendance" 23 November 2015, <http://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/program-boosts-indigenous-school-attendance>

<sup>17</sup> Biddle, N., 2014, 'Developing a behavioural model of school attendance: Policy implications for Indigenous children and youth,' Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research: Canberra.

resources drive different parts of the (MAPS) framework to change behaviour. For example, if you educate (intervention function) parents and increase their parental efficacy and empowerment, the outcome will be their increased confidence and ability to care for their child (Ability -MAPS). The MAPS concept is that to change behaviour, interventions should motivate people to do it, enable people to do it, and ensure the physical and social environment supports doing it. The following table outlines a list of actions or interventions that RSAS has resourced to increase school attendance that can be further tested in the research.



Table 17: RSAS support strategies (actions or interventions)

Actions or interventions		Motivation	Ability	Physical Context	Social Context
Education	Increase knowledge or understanding	Learning culture sparks interest in learning in general through increased identity, self-esteem and belonging "re-awakening the learning"	Fund life skills for parents to increase efficacy and empowerment.	Work with school to create a stable environment in the school and with consistent rules and stability of initiatives	
Persuasion	Using communication to induce positive or negative feelings or stimulate action	Praise and love and admiration displayed to those who are attending. Social marketing the message of value of school attendance.			
Incentivisation	Creating expectation of reward	Bikes/Trips/other rewards for attendance			
Coercion	Creating expectation of punishment or cost	SEAM – loss of income support No shop no school			
Training	Imparting skills		Supporting parents with strategies to manage child/young person's behaviour		
Restriction	Using rules to increase the opportunity to engage in target behaviour and reduce the opportunity to do opposing behaviour			No shop in school hours	Participation in sport/culture/music/art events dependant on attendance
Environmental Restructuring	Changing the physical or social context			Time out areas Indigenous Teacher's aides	Segregation of kids in to groups of learning propensity
Modelling	Providing an example for people to aspire to or imitate	Community stated goals for attendance and value of education Young rangers program Goal setting and pledges for behaviour			Role models such as outstanding students, RSAS staff, Working adults
Enablement	Increasing means, reducing barriers to increase capability or opportunity		Hearing aids Learning supports	Addressing housing, transport, hunger	Addressing social cohesion, safety, social inclusion and social norms.



As a starting point, it is important to note that amongst the community of practitioners involved in increasing school attendance, there is consensus that there is no 'one way to boost attendance'. This lends weight to our own realist-informed evaluation approach, which expects success for some people but not others. Writing about educational outcomes specifically, Gill Westhorp writes:

"Several reviews have summarized the state of knowledge...noting the mixed results that have been achieved, and the need to understand more about how various strategies work differently in different contexts. A recent document which undertook preliminary mapping of the evidence base concerning empowerment and accountability noted the considerable variation in results: "Even studies using the same method (for example RCTs) often yield different outcomes in different contexts, suggesting that success or failure is very dependent on context." <sup>18</sup>

Despite the above, understanding some of the factors that have reportedly led to success in boosting school attendance is crucial to any evaluation framework. As a starting point – and as Purdie and Buckley have characterised it – recent efforts at boosting school attendance in Australia can be characterized as falling under one or more of the following four banners: Scholarships/Support, Sanctions, Incentives/Rewards or Cultural Relevance.<sup>19</sup> An overview of some of these follows.

The Learning on Country program (launched in 2013 in Arnhem land) emphasised the importance of local language culture, identity and place in boosting attendance. Per the program creators, this local Indigenous relevance served as a platform for wider education opportunities and outcomes. One reviewer of the program, Dr William Fogarty from The Australian National University's National Centre for Indigenous Studies (NCIS), stated some of the factors that led to the program's success included grassroots involvement as well as the importance locals themselves placed on their Indigenous culture (and therefore the program curriculum).<sup>20</sup>

Though its actual manifestation can differ from initiative to initiative, the importance of recognising the value of cultural identity and community participation does appear frequently in the literature. Indeed, this factor is listed by the National Curriculum Services (NCS) as among seven common high-frequency themes that appear in well-performing remote Australian schools. The criteria for inclusion in this list required both increased attendance rates and literacy and/or numeracy outcomes.<sup>21</sup> Of those themes, the ones most relevant to school attendance include:

- a strong school leadership and whole-of-school approach to behaviour change
- a profound understanding of the importance of school-community partnerships
- a school culture built on high expectations for all students
- empowering, supporting and engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to enhance their learning capacity
- making learning content engaging, accessible and culturally responsible.

One attendance success story in that NCS research – the Kulkarriya school in Western Australia – moved from high rates of school absences to attendance rates better than those for the state. Strategies to achieve these again highlight the importance of strong community support. A few of these specific initiatives included:

<sup>18</sup> Westhorp, G., Walker, B., Rogers, P., Overbeeke, N., Ball, D., & Brice, G. (2014). Enhancing community accountability, empowerment and education outcomes in low and middle income countries: A realist review. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

<sup>19</sup> Purdie N, Buckley S. Issues Paper No 1 produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. September 2010. <http://www.aihw.gov.au/uploadedFiles/ClosingTheGap/Content/Publications/2010/ctg-ip01.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Program boosts Indigenous school attendance" 23 November 2015, <http://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/program-boosts-indigenous-school-attendance>

<sup>21</sup> McRae, David. (2005) What works. The work program. Improving Outcomes for indigenous students. 2nd ed. Published. Deakin, ACT : National Curriculum Services and the Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 2005.

- A list of students with unexplained absences being posted at the local shop. Inclusion on this list prevented students from entering the shop and the whole community being responsible for getting the student to school.
- Community wardens ensuring students didn't wander the streets at night.
- Regular classroom and whole-school attendance awards and celebrations with the community and parents in attendance.<sup>22</sup>

Taking a rewards system approach to behaviour change, The Catherine Freeman Foundation's Non-Truancy Project gives mountain bikes to students who show the biggest changes in attendance, academic achievement, attitude to peers, behaviour in school and manners. No independent evaluation of this project has been conducted, but the NGO itself states it has resulted in a 20% increase in attendance rates. Finally, and in direct contrast to the above rewards approach, is the Australian Government's controversial 'stick' approach to boosting school attendance via the Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM). The measure is designed to trial the attachment of conditions to income support payments with the aim of encouraging parents (or those with responsibility for a child) to ensure that their child of compulsory school age was enrolled in and attended school regularly. The threat of possible suspension of income support payments was intended to be an effective motivator to encourage school enrolment and attendance. For the sake of brevity, this literature review cannot accommodate for a full review of this program's evaluation. However, the final evaluation report of the pilot program concluded that SEAM did increase attendance rates in some locations, but not in others. However, even where considered useful by schools and NT and QLD education authorities, the policy was said to be challenging to implement without other supporting systems – IT systems, effective communication activities around the policy, the implications of dealing with suspension being some of those listed.<sup>23</sup>

The literature suggests that behaviour change initiatives that are multi-faceted, inter-agency and more holistic in their approach, (i.e. involving community, school and individual efforts) have a higher chance at success. With that said, however, there is very little high-quality evaluation literature and much written about what works and much that is written is lacking in supporting evidence.<sup>24</sup>

## Past evaluations

Two evaluation reports were publicly released during the first two years of implementation of the RSAS: an interim progress report and case study research report<sup>25</sup>.

The interim progress report assessed progress of the first year of implementation. It analysed trends in school attendance and described factors associated with low levels of attendance. The report presented two forms of data analysis: quantitative analysis of weekly school attendance data and a qualitative summary of reasons cited regarding why children are not attending school. The quantitative component involved statistical modelling of attendance trends in RSAS schools with trends in other remote schools. The quantitative analysis found that RSAS is having an independently statistically significant impact on school attendance in Queensland and the Northern Territory RSAS schools relative to comparable schools. It is hard to determine any obvious RSAS impact in South Australian, Western Australian and NSW RSAS schools. The regression analysis provides good support for the notion that RSAS had a positive impact on school attendance in 2014 and this was not part of a broader trend. As this analysis was based on statistical modelling which included other schools and tested the significance of the changes, it provides stronger

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) Trial (2009 - 2012). FINAL EVALUATION REPORT FORMER DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS. May 2014.

<sup>24</sup> "Program boosts Indigenous school attendance" 23 November 2015, <http://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/program-boosts-indigenous-school-attendance>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resource-centre/indigenous-affairs/case-study-research-remote-school-attendance-strategy>

evidence than the published data.

The qualitative component involved analysis of the reasons given as to why children were not at school, collected through weekly traffic light reports (TLRs) received about each school. The qualitative analysis found that the most frequently cited factors for low school attendance across all stage 1 schools were: funerals/cultural activities, poor student behaviour, community unrest and family travel for non-cultural reasons.

The analysis also examined the relationship between the qualitative data from the TLRs and quantitative attendance data for a sample of schools to determine the reason for changes in attendance on a week-by-week basis.

The analysis concluded that the TLRs provided good quality general information about what is happening at a community level that may impact school attendance rates, but it was not possible to confidently identify factors that clearly explained changes in attendance on a week-to-week basis. Commentary provided in TLRs did not always correlate to the changes in attendance rates, i.e. in some weeks, attendance increased despite comments that might have been expected to have resulted in a decrease in school attendance. The report concluded that overall, there is a theme that many families prioritise other issues over regular school attendance, whether they are extended holidays, funerals, cultural events or other reasons. The report found that it was evident from the commentary that some parents do not appreciate the importance of children being at school for every week of term.

The second evaluation activity involved case study research in six communities where RSAS was implemented. The focus of the case studies was to investigate in what ways RSAS was working, who it was working for and in what circumstances. They were conducted in RSAS sites perceived as successful, namely sites with an increase of five percentage points or more in attendance rates from Semester 1 2013 to Semester 2 2014; and/or a RSAS model perceived to be working well on the ground. The RSAS case study research report (across the NT, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia) was released in October 2016. The broad purpose of the report was to assess if RSAS has contributed to increased school attendance, examine the appropriateness of the model and inform future policy development.

The methodology used was broadly based on the Success Case Method (SCM), which takes as a starting point the assumption that there are successes and failures with any initiative; and took a realist evaluation theoretical stance. The SCM method aims to identify and leverage off successes to understand why things worked, then build from this. Fieldwork teams consisted of two researchers, who conducted face-to-face interviews with RSAS coordinators, team members, school principals, PMC network staff, and RSAS providers.

The report found that the ability to adapt RSAS to local conditions is the critical success factor. Four additional high level success factors common to all six sites included an effective and stable RSAS team, a skilled RSAS coordinator, creating relationships with the community and the RSAS team and the school working together.

The other most commonly cited issues negatively impacting on school attendance rates were:

- mobility for other reasons, such as accessing medical services or shopping
- community safety issues
- student disengagement and lack of alternative learning pathways
- the attitude of the principal or school.

Several strengths were also identified which appear to have a positive impact on school attendance. The most common were:



- strong Elders who proactively support school attendance
- a schooling environment which is open to the community and culturally safe, including a supportive principal
- an RSAS team that is well supported and has a strong governance model in place, including linkages to, and information about, a range of support services
- communities where education is valued, employment pathways are visible, and the school is supportive and inclusive of culture and traditional knowledge.

The following figure identifies the barriers as either potential situational triggers or predisposing factors which are either negatively or positively impacting school attendance.

Table 18: Situational triggers and predisposing factors to school attendance identified in SWOT analysis

Situational Triggers	Predisposing Factors-negative	Predisposing Factors –positive
<b>Cultural obligations:</b>	<b>Attitudes/Values:</b>	<b>Attitudes/Values:</b>
Sorry Business or Cultural Business	Reluctance or inability of families/students to attend another school when travelling	Elders actively support and promote school/education/RSAS
<b>Mobility:</b>	Regular school attendance not commonly viewed as critical (i.e. Fridays optional)	Supportive/empathetic RSAS team
Cross border (interstate) events	Community holds negative or apathetic attitudes about education	Principal is engaged with RSAS
Travelling to access health services	Older students (12+) don't see school as their business (including peer pressure)	RSAS team recognised by school for their efforts
Travel for shopping family visits, or other		Employment pathways visible in community
Travel for royalties' payments		Community or family view education positively
Sporting events and Carnivals		
<b>Cohesion:</b>	<b>Cohesion:</b>	<b>Cohesion:</b>
Disruption/Community unrest	School relationship with community not strong	Strong leadership in Community
Family issues/ home environment (e.g. lack of sleep)		Strong RSAS governance model
Bullying at school		Strong relationship between RSAS team and community
<b>Planning:</b>		Strong relationship between RSAS team and school
Sporting events and carnivals held on weekends or school holidays		
Facilitated attendance at other schools when travelling		School is open/responsive to/engaged with community
<b>Program triggers:</b>	<b>Program issues:</b>	<b>Program benefits:</b>
Staff turnover (school)	Lack of coordination with/support from other services	Effective local RSAS staff
Limited access to attendance data	School not supportive of RSAS	Good coordination with/support from other services
Delays in attaining WWCC for RSAS staff	Principal not supportive of attendance strategies	Good strategies/programmes for disengaged students
Staff turnover (RSAS)	Ineffective RSAS provider (poor relationship with community)	
RSAS staff not attending work regularly	RSAS staff not adequately supported by Provider	
<b>Environmental:</b>	<b>Environmental:</b>	<b>Environmental:</b>
School not resourced for mobile students	Lack of support services (or information about services)	Staffing stability in school (experienced staff)
Lack of options for disengaged students	Lack of transport options (buses)	

## APPENDIX C – Realist interview questions

The below questions are the main questions asked in community and are the result of a series of iterations between the realist trainers, PMC staff and Ipsos/Winangali fieldworkers.

In some communities, however, it was felt that the questions were too difficult to use in a local context. Where this was felt to be true, both the show cards and revised questions were used (see next section).

1: Tell me about when your children DO go to school. (Show the card) Why do they go? Who teaches them? (point to card) How do you feel when they go to school? How do your children feel?

2: Now tell me about when they DON'T go to school. (Show the card of them running away). Why don't they go? Who stops them from going to school? How do you feel when they don't go? How do they feel?

3: Have the RSAS staff ever come talk to you or your family? Tell me about that, what did they say, what did they do, how did it make you feel, did you agree or disagree with what they said, did you do any different?

4: What is it that they do that is good or not so good? Why is it good or not?

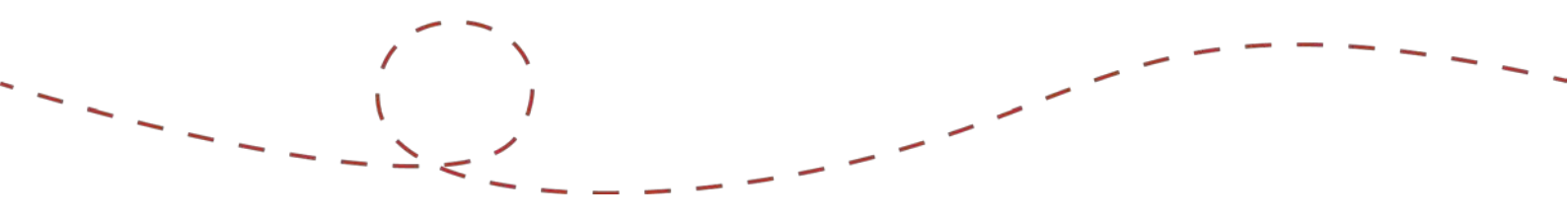
5: What type of person make good Yellow Shirt? What should they know to do that job, why? Who should they be in community, why?

6: Have Yellow Shirt talked about how they are going to work with families to get kids to school? Does this work all the time or sometimes or not at all? What would you tell RSAS staff if they wanted to know the best way to get kids to school?

7: Do you think giving prizes or awards would work to get kids to school? Which prizes work? Why do they work?

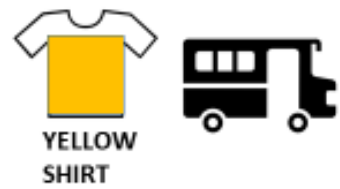
8: What does the community do to get children to school? Does that work all the time or just some times? When it works why does it work?

9: What would you like to see for your community so all kids go to school?



Show cards

## CHILDREN GENERALLY GOES TO SCHOOL



YS PROVIDER



OTHER SUPPORT AGENCIES



SCHOOL



COMMUNITY





## CHILDREN OFTEN NOT AT SCHOOL

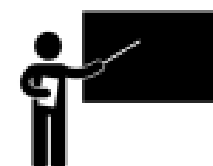
## OTHER SUPPORT AGENCIES



PARENTS/CARERS &  
HOMES



CHILD



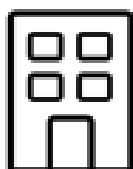
TEACHER/  
PRINCIPAL



YELLOW  
SHIRT



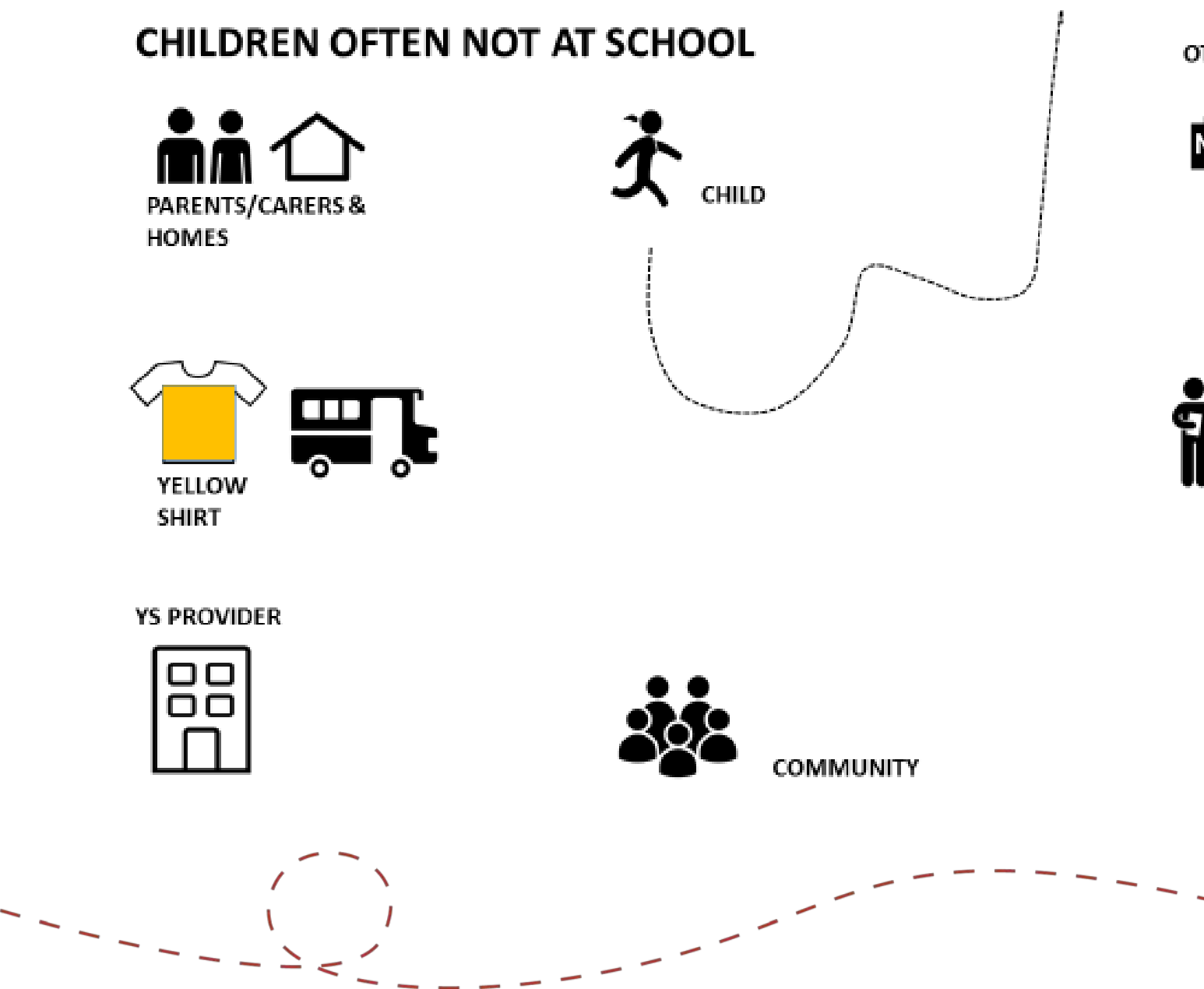
YS PROVIDER



COMMUNITY



SCHOOL



## APPENDIX D – Revised interview questions (for a remote community context)

### Revised Realist Interview Questions

The below questions are the main questions asked in community and are the result of a series of iterations between the realist trainers, PMC staff and Ipsos/Winangali fieldworkers.

In some communities, however, it was felt that the questions were too difficult to use in a local context. Where this was felt to be true, both the show cards and revised questions were used (see next section).

1: Tell me about when your children DO go to school. (Show the card) Why do they go? Who teaches them? (point to card) How do you feel when they go to school? How do your children feel?

2: Now tell me about when they DON'T go to school. (Show the card of them running away). Why don't they go? Who stops them from going to school? How do you feel when they don't go? How do they feel?

3: Have the RSAS staff ever come talk to you or your family? Tell me about that, what did they say, what did they do, how did it make you feel, did you agree or disagree with what they said, did you do any different?

4: What is it that they do that is good or not so good? Why is it good or not?

5: What type of person make good Yellow Shirt? What should they know to do that job, why? Who should they be in community, why?

6: Have Yellow Shirt talked about how they are going to work with families to get kids to school? Does this work all the time or sometimes or not at all? What would you tell RSAS staff if they wanted to know the best way to get kids to school?

7: Do you think giving prizes or awards would work to get kids to school? Which prizes work? Why do they work?

8: What does the community do to get children to school? Does that work all the time or just some times? When it works why does it work?

9: What would you like to see for your community so all kids go to school?



## APPENDIX E – MAPS

Complicated outcomes are often made up of multiple complex behaviours. Therefore, Ipsos has applied a systematic approach to understanding behaviour – Motivation, Ability, Physical and Social (MAPS). MAPS is based on a comprehensive behaviour framework called the Behaviour Change Wheel or COM-B which was developed as an approach to analyse behavioural issues and design effective behaviour change interactions.

*“Behavioural theories can provide insights into people’s motivations, inter-personal relationships, understandings and choices that allow richer analysis of human behaviour than one constrained by the assumptions of neoclassical economics”.<sup>26</sup>*

Much of what is known about behaviour change is borne out of social-psychological research (that is, a combination of sociology and psychology) that has sought to model the deliberative considerations involved in individual decision-making. The aim of this research has been twofold; to describe the factors that drive or explain behavioural outcomes and to show how behaviours change or can be changed over time. An increasing number of influencing factors have been incorporated into models of behaviour, these include but are not limited to Attitudes, Norms, Agency (an individual’s sense that they can carry out an action successfully), Habit, Emotion, and Contextual Factors. These factors add an additional level of complexity when considered at a societal or community level.

Thus, a sizeable body of literature exists on the factors that drive behaviours, the ways that these factors can be manipulated to affect change and, ultimately, ways that organisations can encourage behaviour change in individuals or populations. The behaviour change literature has been described as ‘enormous’<sup>27</sup> and ‘bordering on the unmanageable’.<sup>28</sup> This MAPS explanation does not attempt to cover the ‘vast amount’ of writing in the area<sup>29</sup>, but it does examine the usefulness of behaviour change models and, following on from this, the possible application of process models that can be used by the PMC to guide their understanding of the most appropriate interventions to be used in influencing specific behaviours.<sup>30</sup>

School attendance is not a behaviour. Being clear on what the specific behaviours are that can be investigated in the research that have causality with ‘school attendance’ will need to be clearly in the outcome statements such as “getting up on time, getting ready, waiting for the bus, walking to school etc.”.

The primary approach and method that Ipsos uses for behaviour change is COM-B (Capabilities, Opportunities, Motivation, Behaviour). COM-B was developed as an approach to analyse behavioural issues and design effective behaviour change interactions. Initially developed in the health sector, it is an approach

<sup>26</sup> Leveritt, G., Cossar, A., Jones, M. and Hull, L. (2006) Behavioural Analysis for Policy: New Lessons from Economics, Philosophy, Psychology, Cognitive Science and Sociology. Ministry of Economic Development. ISBN 978-0-478-30451-0

<sup>27</sup> Maio, G., Verplanken, B., Manstead, A., Stroebe, W., Abraham, C., Sheeran, P. and Conner, M. (2007) Social Psychological Factors in Lifestyle Change and Their Relevance to Policy. Journal of Social Issues and Policy Review, 1 (1) 99-137. Cited in Darnton, A. (2008a) ‘GSR Behaviour Change Knowledge Review: Overview of Behaviour Change Models and their Uses Briefing Note for Policy Makers’ Government Social Research.

<sup>28</sup> Jackson, T. (2005) Motivating Sustainable Consumption: A Review Of Evidence On Consumer Behaviour And Behavioural Change. A report to the Sustainable Development Research Network. Cited in Darnton, A. (2008a) ‘GSR Behaviour Change Knowledge Review: Overview of Behaviour Change Models and their Uses Briefing Note for Policy Makers’ Government Social Research.

<sup>29</sup> Darnton, A. (2008a) Government Social Research (GSR) Behaviour Change Knowledge Review, Reference Report: An overview of behaviour change models and their uses. Government Social Research Unit.

<sup>30</sup> For an overview of theories of human behaviour see Changing Behaviour: a public policy perspective (APSC, 2007) and the UK’s Government Social Research report Reference Report: An overview of behaviour change models and their uses (Darnton, 2008a).

that Ipsos is using globally across a range of behavioural change issues.

The behaviour change wheel is characterised by:

- at its core: a behaviour system where behaviour is shaped by three factors: capability, opportunity and motivation.
- around the core: nine 'intervention functions' describe the range of interventions that will create or address deficiencies in capability and/or opportunity and/or motivation for the behaviour to take place.
- at the outside: the range of policy categories in which the interventions can be designed and implemented.

The following is a representation of the three layers of the behaviour change wheel.<sup>31</sup>

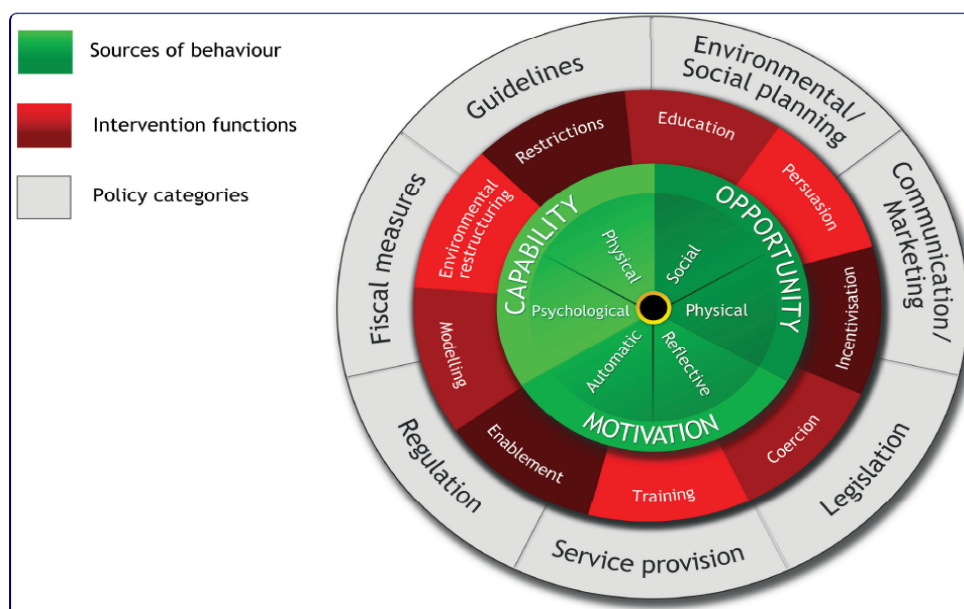


Figure 4: Behaviour change wheel

COM-B is based on an extensive review of a wide range of theories, formal models and approaches used to frame behaviour challenges and develop interventions or policies at both population-level and individual-level. The review highlighted that there is often an insufficient focus on understanding the nature of the behaviour(s) as the starting point of behaviour change interventions. Interventions are then designed with no formal analysis of the desired behaviour or explicit formulation of the expected mechanism of action and common sense ends up being the main guiding principle to designing interventions. COM-B was developed to provide a systematic lens to review all aspects of behaviour(s) and the factors that act as potential levers or obstacles.

<sup>31</sup> Michie S. et al (2011) The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions, Implementation Science, 6/42, 1-11 available as pdf at <http://www.implementationscience.com/content/6/1/42>.

The key questions guiding the researchers are:

- why are the behaviours the way they are?
- what needs to change for the desired behaviour(s) to occur?

Ipsos has adapted the COM-B model to split 'Opportunity' into two domains – Physical influences and Social Influences. This makes the acronym MAPS, with the first two letters being Motivation and Ability.

To develop a fine understanding of the factors surrounding the behaviour (or lack thereof), a Theory Domains Framework was developed and resulted in 17 different distinct domains to analyse behaviour and its antecedents/environment:

Table 19: MAPS Framework

Motivation	Ability (Capability)	Physical context (Opportunity)	Social Setting (Opportunity)
<p>M1 social/professional role and identity</p> <p>M2 beliefs about own capabilities</p> <p>M3 optimism</p> <p>M4 intentions</p> <p>M5 goals</p> <p>M6 beliefs about consequences</p> <p>M7 reinforcement</p> <p>M8 emotion</p>	<p>A1 knowledge</p> <p>A2 cognitive and interpersonal skills</p> <p>A3 memory, attention and decision processes</p> <p>A4 behavioural regulation</p> <p>A5 physical skills</p>	<p>P1 environmental context and resources</p>	<p>S1 social influences</p> <p>S2 social norms</p> <p>S3 cultural obligations</p>

The domains framework draws from many previous theories and approaches, for example:

- beliefs about consequences, intentions and social influences from Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)
- beliefs about own capabilities from Theory of Planned Behaviour as an extension of TRA
- behavioural regulation, emotion, identity and reinforcement from MINDSPACE (messenger, incentive, norms, defaults, salience, priming, affect, commitment and ego)

Motivation is always the prime driver of behaviour (the brain processes that energise and direct behaviour). Many theories used in the past recognise the power of reflective motivation to impact behaviour (for example, through our sense of identity, our beliefs, intentions and plans). Social cognitive models (e.g. contemplation to action) used in behaviour change programmes tap strongly into reflective motivation by creating awareness and desirability and a series of stages to behaviour.

The Motivation component of COM-B seeks to explore both reflective and reflexive (automated or impulsive) motivation to enhance the likelihood of participation. In health-related situations as well as many other behavioural settings, impulsivity, habit and self-control play a major role in fostering or inhibiting the desired behaviour. Memory, attention and automated decision processes also present powerful levers to influence motivation and impact behaviour; this is evidenced by a large body of experimental research in social, cognitive and economic psychology as well as the application of such principles to all kinds of behavioural challenges.

COM-B provides a comprehensive framework to understand why behaviours are the way they are and enable researchers and other stakeholders to gain practical insights on all possible facets enabling or hindering behavioural change to 'make it work'.





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