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Enabling collaboration through co-design: Insights from child protection and domestic and family violence practice

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Abstract
Cross-sector collaboration between statutory child protection and domestic and family violence services (DFV) is recognised as a best social work practice to improve the safety of women and children. However, there are many challenges in establishing collaborative service-delivery, particularly between statutory child protection and non-statutory specialist DFV agencies and there has been extremely limited research in this context. Addressing this research gap, this study used a qualitative research design to demonstrate the benefits of using co-design to build collaborative practice at the intersection of DFV and child protection in South Australia. Co-design processes were convened over two sets of three workshops which were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis, examining both their content and process over time. The co-design process created a safe relational space facilitating building of relationships and the development of two prototypes. The two prototypes articulated the essential elements of collaborative service delivery including the essential nature of partnership, creating a shared language, and addressing power dynamics. Co-design engaged practitioners including social workers to develop collaboration that was culturally safe, informed by practice wisdom and expert knowledge that responsive and effective in a context of complexity.

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Introduction

Research has established that a large proportion of children and young people with child protection concerns have experienced domestic and family violence (DFV). It is estimated that 25% of children in the USA (Berg et al., 2022) and 39.6% in Australia (Haslam et al., 2023) experience DFV during their childhood and that 50% of all child protection concerns in the UK are due to DFV (Department for Education, 2019). There is also a large body of evidence to suggest that children who live in families where there is DFV are also more likely to experience other forms of child abuse, including neglect, and physical and sexual abuse (Campo, 2015). Despite these statistics, service-delivery at the intersection of child protection and DFV in Australia and other jurisdictions has been described as fragmented, creating a complex system impossible to navigate (Higgins et al., 2022). Further, historical trends show that the rates of DFV being reported to child protection services is increasing (Humphreys and Healey, 2017) while simultaneously remaining underestimated (Bastian et al., 2023a).

Collaboration is considered best practice in social work at the intersection of DFV and child protection to counteract fragmented service provision. Macvean et al. (2018) conducted a scoping review on collaboration across DFV and child protection sectors and identified that establishing a shared vision for collaborative practice, formalising a model of intervention, creating an authorising environment, establishing clear leadership, and sharing information facilitate collaboration. It has also been established that collaborative work leads to recognition of different expertise held in the respective sectors, spending time reflecting on practice, reducing the frustration and confusion that can result from unclear roles, and building a sense of trust that can further contribute to enhanced collaboration (Wendt et al., 2021).

However, collaborative service-delivery is also challenging particularly between statutory child protection and non-statutory DFV agencies. Macvean et al. (2015) identified that child protection representatives often did not attend joint meetings or meet their obligations, decrease in child protection notifications from DFV services, differing thresholds for interventions, conflicting expectations, and lack of shared understandings and language are significant barriers. DFV specialist services have been influenced by feminist movements whereas child protection has historically prioritised the wellbeing of children to the extent that practitioners become coercively controlling and blame mothers for their own victimization (Humphreys, 2008). These underlying paradigms continue to inform professional social work interactions and decision making, where statutory services may hold a philosophical stance of ‘saving children’ in contrast with DFV services who prioritise the mother-child relationships and support (Hamilton et al., 2020).

Collaboration between Aboriginal organisations and statutory child protection may result in culturally safe services however power differentials and intergenerational trauma impedes meaningful progress and reduction in removal of children (Moore et al., 2023). This lack of power is characterised by the ongoing impacts of colonisation, oppression, forced removal of children, and racism. Aboriginal services lack decision making power necessary for successful collaboration as their contributions and expertise is often overpowered by larger government services (SNAICC 2020). Aboriginal services have finite funding, fewer resources, limited services resulting in a diminished power base and ability to negotiate in relation to service provision (SNAICC 2020). Successful collaboration between statutory child protection and Aboriginal services is dependent on professional alliances, respect, challenging of racism (Van Noppen et al., 2023), and recognition of cultural and practice expertise (SNAICC 2020). Effective and successful collaboration is dependent on agencies coming together and working together as equals (Wright et al., 2024).

This study articulates how the use of co-design can facilitate collaboration at the intersection of DFV and child protection. Co-design is defined as "meaningful end-user engagement in research design and includes instances of engagement that occur across all stages of the research process" (Slattery et al., 2020: 2). The process of co-design and establishing a relationally safe space is a practice informed approach drawing on the knowledge from either social workers, practitioners, policy makers, researchers, or service users to develop solutions to complex issues. Benefits of co-design include developing sustainable solutions that are contextually relevant and effective (Donetto et al., 2015); building a shared vision that informs service improvement, facilitating transparency and openness, and encouraging respectful discussions where people sit together with discomfort and reflect on practice (Lamb et al., 2023). It is argued, that co-design may result in outcomes that are more accepted by end users (Manafo et al., 2018) because it is inclusive, increases understanding, enhances confidence (Bailey et al., 2015), and builds rapport and connections between project members (Brett et al., 2010). Co-design has gained recognition in research because it has the potential to generate novel and practice-based solutions to complex issues through improved buy-in from a range of stakeholders to focus on quality social work practice, beyond economic efficiency (Filipe et al., 2017).

This paper will focus on the use of co-design as a relationally safe space to facilitate collaboration and develop two prototypes or service models that facilitate collaborative practice across statutory and non-statutory sectors. Details of the prototypes will be discussed in forthcoming publications (Bastian et al., 2023b). The research context will be outlined followed by methodology, findings, and implications for social work practice.

The research context

This study was embedded within a larger research agenda focusing on building collaborative practice at the intersection of child protection and DFV. This paper outlines how the use of a practice based-research process brought practitioners together in a relationally safe space to commence building collaboration across statutory and

non-statutory organisations and develop two prototypes ready for implementation. The first prototype (P1) was the outcome of bringing practitioners together from Department for Child Protection (DCP) and Women's Safety Services SA (WSSSA) informed by approaches that are culturally informed, trauma and DFV informed and child centred. The prototype set out referral criteria, assessment and safety planning, and intervention that centred the children and women and kept the perpetrator visible. The second prototype (P2) was the coming together of practitioners from DCP and Korna Winmil Yunti (KWY) that focused on culturally safe collaboration. Elements of the prototype were very similar to P1 however it specifically acknowledged and was informed by ongoing impacts of colonisation and forced removals of children and elevating the voices of Aboriginal people in the context of collaborative practice.

The aim of bringing practitioners together was to understand the social, cultural, and political contexts within which the research was taking place. It is well documented that there are existing and long-standing issues between statutory organisations and DFV services (Wendt et al., 2021) and statutory organisations and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Moore et al., 2023). In recognition of these challenges, the researchers met with key representatives from each organisation to discuss how best to establish a safe and respectful space to initiate collaboration. This included recognizing the specific issues and concerns relevant to the communities involved (Pasque and Alexander, 2023) and have the opportunity to discuss existing tensions. Aboriginal practitioners and leaders were invited to participate in the relational process without a preconceived model and the focus remained on elevating their voices toward system change and that their experiences would dictate and ensure that the prototypes to build collaboration were culturally safe and responsive to their needs and concerns. Once the prototypes were finalised, they were ready to be trialled and tested in practice.

The aims of the research were to:

1. To explore and identify the needs of practitioners to work collaboratively at the intersection of domestic and family violence and child protection.
2. To bring together practitioners to develop a prototype to enhance collaboration across the two sectors.
3. To build a safe environment where practitioners could build professional alliances and influence practice change at the intersection of DFV and child protection.

Methodology

A qualitative interpretative research design (Walters, 2013) informed the collection and interpretation of the data. Interpretive research operates on the premise that social reality is not singular or objective but is constructed by human experiences and social contexts (Walters, 2013).

Recruitment and sample

To build collaboration across the statutory and non-statutory DFV services, the research required the establishment of an authorising environment where there was strong leadership and formalised governance processes. The Advisory Group included senior staff members from DCP, WSSSA, and KWY, and senior Aboriginal practitioners from both organisations. The Advisory Group was responsible for overseeing strategic and operational concerns associated with the project. As leaders, they guided and provided accountability to the collaborative effort.

The Advisory Group members purposely recruited practitioners from their organisations to attend the workshops. Non-probability purposive sampling (Neuman, 2013) was utilised so the representative practitioners attending the workshops shared their practice wisdom, were able to meaningfully contribute to discussions about collaborative practice (Eide, 2012), and were committed to system change across the sectors to improve outcomes at the intersection of DFV and child protection.

Two sets of co-design workshops were facilitated where two collaborative service prototypes were developed. The first workshop series resulted in the development of a culturally responsive prototype between DCP and KWY (P2) and the second between DCP and WSSSA (P1). Each prototype involved three workshops (i.e. six workshops in total).

Co-design of the culturally responsive prototype involved the participation of fourteen participants from DCP and seven participants from KWY, the Aboriginal community-controlled organisation. The co-designed prototype between DCP and WSSSA involved the participation of sixteen participants from DCP and four from WSSSA, the DFV shelter. Identifying details of participants, including their respective agencies, have been omitted to protect confidentiality. Prior to each workshop the researchers discussed ethical issues with participants relating to confidentiality, limits to anonymity, the process of the workshops, how the information will be stored and used. Consent forms were signed by all practitioners prior to each workshop. The study was approved by the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee at Flinders University (Project no: 7850).

Data collection and analysis

The researchers, as facilitators, provided some guiding questions to generate discussion for each of the workshops but also allowed the participants to talk with each other and lead the conversation to focus on their needs and concerns. The first three-hour workshop focused on relationship building and resulted in a written understanding of each agency's mandate, roles, responsibilities, and perspectives on the opportunities and barriers to working collaboratively. This information informed the first draft of each prototype. The second three-hour workshop reviewed the initial draft, refined the prototypes, and began planning its implementation. The final workshop involved full endorsement of the prototypes, which were then ready for trial and testing. This iterative process ensured that the prototypes, serving as frameworks for collaboration, were developed through continuous reflection and refinement based on previous discussions. The workshop

discussions were recorded, transcribed, and analysed in Nvivo 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2020) using thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017). Each transcript was read multiple times, and inductive coding used to generate semantic themes. This produced three main themes and six sub-themes.

Findings

The workshops enabled co-design and establishment of relationally safe spaces resulting in the development of two prototypes to enhance collaboration at the intersection of child protection and DFV. The safe and reflective space that contributed to building of relationships, establishing communication and shared understanding, and addressing power dynamics.

Co-design and building relationships

Participants expressed their commitment to building relationships that promoted genuine partnerships. Participants described partnership as a transparent and professionally respectful relationship, with each partner being accountable in their work with clients contributing to the ongoing building of professional alliances, expertise, and collaboration. Two sub-themes emerged as vital to sustaining partnerships in this context: prioritising relationship building and purposeful collaboration.

Prioritising relationship building

There was agreement amongst the participants that relationships were central to collaboration and needed to be prioritised before addressing details about practice. Co-design provided the reflective and relational space where participants spent time getting to know each and commence building relationships so integral to collaboration. One participant described how establishing relationships across services influenced positive outcomes for children and families:

> … when workers have a relationship across organisations is when good work is happening. It's when they don't have a relationship, they don't get each other, they don't really know what's going on, is when things aren't going well.

Relationship building was dependent on the commitment to remain engaged in difficult conversations and working in the context of complexity rather than becoming defensive or withdrawing. One participant expressed this idea:

> Yeah, one of the things that I think is missing … is about a commitment to keep the conversation going. So it is about both of us – both organisations work in tricky spaces, and it would be easy to say 'actually that's not the way we do things', step back – do it ourselves – go other ways – go different ways, but I think what is essential to collaboration is to say, 'Wow we've hit a spot here, we're going to work this out together.'

The statement indicates that challenges were expected to arise in the process of collaboration and that participants would need to continue to reach out and build the relationship despite these difficulties. Persevering and navigating difficult conversations contributed to the establishment of professional alliances.

Co-design facilitated a much-needed opportunity for practitioners to get to know each other and feel safe to engage in uncomfortable conversations. Practitioners who participated in the workshop articulated that there were many system barriers to forming professional relationships, including lack of time to engage in discussions, financial implications of time not spent directly with clients, ongoing changes to procedures and referral pathways, high staff turnover, and the number of practitioners involved in a single case. Of these barriers, time was highlighted as the most significant, and that in time-poor systems collaboration was often procedural rather than relationship-driven. This was particularly important for Aboriginal practitioners who felt strongly about this aspect, identifying that Aboriginal cultural values placed greater emphasis on relational processes rather timeframes. One Aboriginal participant explained:

> I was quite surprised at comments from quite a lot of people [at a recent training], they wouldn't acknowledge white privilege and some of the defensiveness around – 'Well, we don't have time to [be culturally responsive]'. But we always have time to have relationships and be respectful.

Purposeful collaboration

Given the above identified barriers to prioritising relationships, participants also articulated that partnership could only be sustained by maintaining their focus on the purpose of their collaboration. Collaboration could become administrative and result in compliance or superficial consultation rather than the effective sharing of risk or shared decision making so aptly expressed as follows:

> People shift from a collaborative kind of approach to one that is quite utilitarian, which is, 'What am I getting out of it?', or 'What is my agency getting out of it?' I even think that what my senior staff would say about their collaborative [practice] to others is actually quite utilitarian, so it's about what's the benefit for the agency.

Purposeful collaboration may be more difficult to enact in the context of statutory child protection where legislative power mandates other agencies to provide information for decision-making. It was highlighted by the participants that statutory child protection required a shift in culture and practice as articulated by this child protection practitioner:

> Because we focus on timelines and then it becomes a bit like, 'I'm going to tell you what to do because I've got to fit into my timeframe' rather than sit down and make a plan together. It's, 'I need this by this and I need that'. And it's taught that way from the beginning, the minute they do training in DCP it's taught.

Collaboration required practitioners across statutory and non-statutory organisations to be trusted equals with expertise in their respective fields. On this basis, the participants co-constructed the prototypes as a way of bringing expertise together with clearly identified outcomes. One participant explained:

> So, I think both services and both workers need to be open to constantly critiquing and going 'Is it working? No, it's not working, let's change our strategy.'

This encouraged both agencies to hold responsibility for the success of their collaboration and work together to enhance outcomes for children and families. However, this required all participants being actively responsive to issues rather than passively accepting the systemic barriers. Participants openly deliberated and recognised that historically the sectors had complained about each other, creating a significant divide between statutory and non-statutory services. There was consensus that purposeful collaboration could be reached, but only as part of dynamic and ongoing co-design process rather than being achieved in a single workshop.

Co-design to generate shared understanding

Communication was identified essential for collaborative practice. Communication included the sharing of information, established processes to deliberate about the children and their families, having a shared understanding and language about DFV, risk and safety. This required a process that was fundamentally relational. The co-design process created a safe and dedicated space for participants to identify what the agencies required to enhance communication and collaboration. Subthemes identified were having a shared language and embedded communication pathways.

Shared language

It became evident that participants across the agencies lacked consensus on the meaning of core concepts such as child-centred practice, safety and risk. Also, each sector used organisational jargon and processes that were not understood by their partner agencies. Co-design presented a valuable opportunity to engage in discussions where participants developed more understanding about each other's agencies and a shared understanding of core concepts. One participant even expressed that the term 'collaborative' needed to be defined before being applied in practice:

> [If we] will be truly collaborative in the future, we all [need to] speak the same language as in, 'What does risk mean, what does collaborative mean, what is a warm referral?' … So, it'd be good for us to be on the same page around some of those things.

While some terms were easy to define, others had to be calibrated by practitioners towards a shared understanding. Participants identified that the values, beliefs, cultures, and norms of each organisation influenced the meaning of concepts sometimes resulting

in disparate interpretations and practice responses. Shared understandings would enhance investment and follow-through on agreements facilitating genuine implementation of the prototypes. For example, risk and safety were identified as core concepts however participants did not have shared understanding of practice thresholds and organisational mandates. One participant explained:

> One of the things that I wrote that I think we really need to do for true collaboration is have that common understanding of risk and safety, like when has the threshold been hit and actually it needs to come back to DCP. Because I think those things – different agencies have different thresholds. You ask us to name our threshold, we probably can't do it. Sometimes it's person specific, sometimes it's around the tools, sometimes it's around a whole lot of things. But I do think we need a common understanding around where is the limit to that.

Co-design facilitated reflection and the construction of meaning in relation to these core concepts which were integrated into the prototypes. Participants used examples to support explanations and, by engaging in shared discussions, a shared language was achieved. In this way, the creation of shared language also functioned as a rehearsal for the implementation phase. This process of creating shared meanings occurred in all workshops, with latter workshops addressing more complex concepts such as the meaning of safety and complexity.

Language also needed to be culturally appropriate. Aboriginal participants expressed the importance of the definition of violence, advocating for 'family violence' to be used instead of 'domestic violence'. A participant shared this view:

> I think from an Aboriginal perspective, if we're working with this prototype with Aboriginal families, then I think family violence is the terminology … Aboriginal people have said that they really have issues with 'domestic', because for Aboriginal women they were 'domestics'.

This process of establishing clear definitions therefore ensured that the culturally informed prototype was culturally responsive and representative of culturally safe practice and reflective of the experience of Aboriginal families.

Another critical aspect of the language used was its ability to communicate power and intimidation. Participants identified that statutory language was sometimes difficult to comprehend and, when not understood by other practitioners, could generate confusion and be threatening in nature.

> Out of these conversations you know themes emerge and I think one of them is about the language that we use, and I think a key thing in the department is about realising the impact for some of its language and the power it has to frame things because of the position that we hold, and our access to the courts and things like that. So, I think it's really critical that we don't underestimate that.

The participants spent time during the workshops engaging in rich discussion not only developing a shared language that was foundation to the prototypes but also took the opportunity to clarify some of the machinations each organisation.

Embedded and formalised communication pathways

Communication was identified as critically important. The participants identified the need for formalised processes for bringing practitioners together to discuss information about the child and family including referral information, family history, perpetrator behaviour, and the impact on the children and women. Some of the other mechanisms chosen for the prototype were warm referrals, where both agencies would attend the home of a client together, scheduled case discussions, and a shared case plan to create actions for both agencies to complete. Participants stated that these mechanisms would create shared understanding throughout critical decision-making points during an intervention. Again, relationship was embodied in this form of communication, with participants expressing a desire to have face-to-face connection with each other to facilitate collaboration. Although information could be shared in other formats, participants stated that human connection would provide additional benefits such as facilitating trust, the mentoring of staff, broadening perspectives, exploring values, and generating critical thinking.

Participants also stated that formal communication pathways were necessary due to the competing number of policies and processes required of statutory child protection staff, which could hinder change at the practitioner level. Participants from all agencies identified that change at a strategic level often did not translate to operational change:

> There's a real distinct disconnect between what's written on paper, [and] the conversations I'm having. But it's not flowing down [to an operational level]. (KWY)

> You find [collaboration] does exist, but it's about individual workers … not systems. (WSSSA)

> [Statutory child protection] is not necessarily terribly good at disseminating some of the findings and things back to the field, I think that's a real gap. (Statutory child protection agency)

Because of this "communication break", participants stated that the prototypes needed to have mechanisms to facilitate collaboration amongst frontline practitioners rather than only expressing the intention to collaborate.

Another formal mechanism that was discussed during the workshops and later implemented was a staff member to liaise across the organisations to facilitate communication and implement the prototype. The role and function of this staff member was to lead the implementation of the prototypes at the practice level. Their role and responsibilities included leading case discussions and case reviews and identifying any issues that emerged in relation to the implementation of the prototype. The staff member liaised between the organisations in relation to information sharing and specialist consultations about referrals, service provision, and client outcomes.

Co-design to address power dynamics

The recognition of the unequal distribution of power across the relevant agencies emerged as a dominant theme. Through developing relationships at the co-design workshops participants felt safe and comfortable to engage in some challenging conversations such as power and statutory authority. Within the broader theme of power, two sub-themes were identified: the legislative responsibility held by statutory child protection and the need to balance power in relationships. These are discussed in more detail.

Legislative responsibility as a barrier

Statutory child protection was perceived by participants to hold the most power in any collaborative arrangement. This authority stemmed from delegated legislative power and responsibility to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. Practitioners in statutory child protection were able to access information about families and determine outcomes for them. Practitioners agreed that power dynamics are inherent in all relationships at the intersection of DFV and child protection and therefore needed to be visible, recognised, and sometimes challenged. One participant summarised these ideas:

> We are talking about statutory power as well and when you're just entering a system of social service there is going to be power exercised everywhere.

Statutory power influenced timelines, decision making, and practices, thus impacting all aspects of collaboration. Many of these responsibilities were dictated by the court system, which sat external to collaboration, thereby restricting collaborative efforts. One participant spoke about the timeframes dictated by the court system:

> We have got [state legal system] on one side breathing down with really strict timelines especially now at the moment where things and decisions need to be made, pieces of work need to be produced really quickly.

The involvement of the court also meant that child protection staff were under scrutiny and that they needed to manage and mitigate risk and are sometimes blamed for poor outcomes. In a risk averse environment, this influenced their capacity to trust the expertise of other agencies, leaving them more likely to exercise statutory power rather than think of creative solutions with other agencies to work with the family.

The legislative requirements also impacted the way that practice was shaped. For example, one of the proposed ways of enhancing collaboration was to develop a shared case plan. This would allow the development of goals that brought together both agencies. However, statutory child protection participants explained that their case plans had specific requirements that would not be suitable for a shared document:

> The difficulty is the purpose of the case plan [we] provide to court is not one that actually has benefit on day-to-day utility for working with families. It's an accountability document and it lays out a range of things and it's a current requirement of the court process.

Because of this legislative requirement, a shared case plan template as part of each prototype was created, however, this was also met with concern. Participants expressed worry about the increased administrative workload, with child protection participants stating practitioners were already overwhelmed with paperwork. This important discussion was not resolved during the workshops but later decided that a collaborative document would be created after each meeting.

Balancing power in relationships

To achieve equitable practice, participants explored when power could and could not be shared, proposing realistic solutions about how to navigate the power dynamics and integrate them into the prototype. One of the primary aims identified by participants for the prototypes was to share decision-making. Participants highlighted that statutory child protection staff often consulted with DFV agencies; however, this did not represent collaboration as there was no sharing of power or decision making. One participant stated:

> I think it's about learning to work collaboratively… [people] think inclusion is collaboration and it's not. And I think DCP have always historically seen themselves as the decision makers and it is true that they are the statutory agency that's involved. What's not true is that they don't – they don't actually have the solutions.

Given that the Department for Child Protection (DCP) held legislative decision-making power, participants from WSSSA identified lack of access to those with decision-making authority as a barrier to collaboration. Participants explained that decision-makers needed to attend collaborative case discussion meetings, otherwise discussions were merely tokenistic. One participant expressed their frustration:

> We're at a critical decision-making point for the family [and do not] have the decision maker there, 'Sorry the supervisor is not here today – oh the senior prac[titioner] is not here they are at another meeting. So can we have another meeting?' Then the other meeting doesn't happen.

Participants stated that this led to a pattern of decisions being made without any collaboration and sometimes without informing the other agency working intensively with the family. The participants recognised this as a broader systemic issue and discussed solutions that could be built into the prototypes. The final prototype designs required case discussions to be scheduled in advance and have the attendance of senior staff with decision-making authority.

Aboriginal practitioners stated the power imbalance was greater between statutory child protection and Aboriginal community-controlled agencies due to colonisation and forced child removal which served as a constant backdrop to all interactions. Aboriginal

agencies and Aboriginal practitioners hold cultural authority that should be valued rather than ignored or dismissed. An Aboriginal practitioner explained:

> I think as an Aboriginal worker supporting Aboriginal women that it in itself is one of the biggest challenges because you know the majority of workers are non-Aboriginal and so that I think adds another complexity to it, and also that we as Aboriginal people – whether we are workers or whether we are clients, we have a history that comes along with us.

The co-design workshops and processes provided Aboriginal practitioners a safe space to transparently share their views and solutions about addressing power imbalance in everyday practice to enable collaboration. One participant commented about the co-design process, "I liked the way it was evident that Aboriginal voices were privileged." This allowed an Aboriginal understanding of collaboration to be generated where ongoing and active efforts were placed on the importance of relationships.

> I think that as our relationships develop and grow that we develop trust in each other as professionals, and then we can hold some of those really uncomfortable conversations in a safe way with each other.

These relationships were thought to have benefit beyond the end of the co-design workshops, facilitating ongoing conversations amongst practitioners.

Discussion

The use of co-design as described in this paper enabled the bringing together of practitioners who worked at the intersection of child protection and DFV. The practitioners were provided a safe space to purposefully co-create, validate, and strengthen collaborative practice. The safe space enabled building of professional alliances, nurture relationships, co-create language to enhance collaboration and redress power imbalances. These findings align with the identified factors necessary to facilitate collaborative practice at the intersection of child protection and DFV (Canty, 2022; Macvean et al., 2018). The discussion of the details of the prototypes and the impacts of collaborative practice at the intersection of child protection and DFV is complex, is beyond the scope of this however details of the prototypes outline in other forthcoming publications (Bastian et al., 2023c).

Co-design workshops provided a safe space and valuable opportunity for practitioners to formalise relationships and clear expectations of accountability and a shared vision of the outcomes for children, young people, and their families. This occurred through bringing practitioners and establishing an authorising environment, defined as the 'legitimising of processes within and across systems' (Connolly et al., 2017: 5). The workshops, as an authorising environment, produced collaborative practices, and new working arrangements. More importantly, a safe reflective space was established to engage with discomfort and discuss challenging issues and existing tensions leading to discussions that were genuine, and solution focused. P1 enabled practitioners from

statutory child protection and DFV services to deliberate on ideological tensions and demonstrate committed to building alliances with mothers and protect children (Wendt et al., 2021). The development of a culturally safe prototype (P2) enabled Aboriginal practitioners to engage in truth telling and impacts of intergenerational trauma, colonisation, and forced removals of children and continued involvement with child protection (Van Noppen et al., 2023). Co-design and building collaboration with statutory entities provides opportunities to engage in culturally safe practice and reduce removal of children from their communities (Green, 2019).

The co-design space also enabled the development of a shared language that facilitated communication in the context of DFV and child protection. Through the creation of this shared language, practitioners also addressed some of the ideological and organisational differences between the sectors. Historically, the DFV sector has managed risk while keeping children within the family, whereas statutory child protection has focused on removal (Hamilton et al., 2020). Inherent in these different approaches is the determination of risk thresholds and the appropriate response, where mothers are not blamed and men who perpetrate violence are more visible and held accountable. The practitioners who participated in the co-design process identified that there was a lack of clarity about risk thresholds and determinations, allowing both sectors to create a shared narrative of what success would look like for their collaborative service delivery. This process also highlighted power imbalances, as risk thresholds determine when statutory functions are enacted.

Power was identified as a dominant theme. These power differences are even more critical for collaboration between statutory child protection and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, who continue to experience the impact of colonisation and systemic racism. These practices have historically led to generations of forced child removal for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, with some arguing that the underlying beliefs persist in current practice (Funston and Herring, 2016). Further, safety and risk are culturally contextualised concepts, and their meaning cannot be assumed. The co-design process which facilitated relationally safe spaces afforded Aboriginal practitioners an opportunity to 'translate' Aboriginal conceptualisations into Westernized statutory terminology, highlighting discrepancies and enhancing meaning. Co-design enabled understanding of the institutional and socio-political context, experiencing discomfort systemic pressures, and power imbalances which in turn facilitated pathways to build a relational space to sustain collaboration in a complex practice context (Van Noppen et al., 2023). Using co-design is consistent an ethical approach as discussed by Wright and his Colleagues (2024).

Conclusion and implications for practice

This study highlights the use of co-design to develop collaborative service delivery and enhance social work practice where children and their families live in a context of complexity and violence. While collaboration is well-recognised as a best-practice approach to enhance the safety of women and children, there are many barriers to creating and sustaining collaborative efforts across statutory and non-statutory sectors. Co-design

enabled identification of barriers that could otherwise derail implementation if a top-down approach was used. The main factors identified for successful collaboration were prioritising and building purposeful relationships, creating a shared language with embedded communication pathways, and addressing power dynamics. Co-design enabled the creation of new practice that foster meaningful change by bridging systems with deeply entrenched philosophical and practice differences. In particular, the co-design process elevated the voices of Aboriginal practitioners, facilitating culturally saturated discussions that challenge systemic racism and oppressive practice. This contributes to social work's mandate in addressing the legacy of statutory child protection forcibly removing children and marginalising the involvement of Aboriginal families, practitioners, and communities. By engaging all practitioners including social workers in a meaningful co-design process, this study shows that more sustainable and contextually relevant solutions can be developed, ultimately improving outcomes for children, young people, and families at the intersection of DFV and child protection.

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