

Stronger laws to keep children safe

The Every Child Matters reforms introduce stronger safeguards for children and young people.

All children deserve to grow up safe, supported and connected to their family, community and culture, and these reforms ensure children's safety and wellbeing remain at the centre of every decision. The reforms strengthen the child protection system through clearer decision-making principles, earlier support for vulnerable families and stronger accountability.

The reforms aim to:

- keep children safe and central to all decision-making
- strengthen early intervention and support for parents and families
- hold parents accountable for meeting their children's needs

What is changing

The *Care and Protection of Children Act* has been updated across 7 key areas to:

- make children's safety the paramount consideration in child protection decisions about a child's best interests
- introduce a universal child placement principle to strengthen stability, permanency and connection for all children
- strengthen legal representation for children and increase the participation of long-term carers in court proceedings
- introduce a proactive efforts framework to support earlier intervention, family finding and safe reunification
- reduce repeated short-term orders and provide greater certainty for children, families and carers
- introduce Family Responsibility Agreements and Family Responsibility Orders to strengthen early intervention and parental accountability
- strengthen the Working with Children Check system to improve safety and reduce unnecessary administrative burden

The changes are designed to make decision-making clearer for child protection workers, make supports and processes easier for families to access, and provide greater clarity and stability for children and families. Updates introduce a more structured approach, requiring consideration of the:

- child's safety and protection from harm
- need for stable and nurturing relationships
- importance of long-term stability and permanency

This provides clearer guidance for practitioners and the courts and supports more consistent decision-making.

Why it matters

Children rely on adults and services to make safe, timely and informed decisions about their lives. When concerns are not addressed early, families may miss the opportunity to receive support before problems become more serious.

When decisions about reunification or long-term care are delayed, children can experience years of uncertainty about where they will live and who will care for them.

The reforms provide clearer responsibilities for parents, practitioners, services and the courts. They aim to:

- support families before concerns reach crisis point
- keep children safely at home wherever possible
- strengthen accountability by demonstrating the support provided to children and families
- strengthen children's voices in decisions that affect them
- maintain family, community and cultural connections
- provide greater stability when children cannot safely return home
- improve accountability across the child protection system.

What this looks like in practice

The reforms strengthen support right across the child protection system - from prevention and early intervention through to investigations, reunification and long-term care.



When a child at risk is identified, the Department of Children and Families will continue to:

- prioritise immediate safety risks
- consider long-term stability and permanency earlier in the decision-making process
- focus on building and maintaining strong, supportive relationships
- work with families, communities and partner agencies to achieve the best possible outcomes for children.

Children's safety will always be the priority. At the same time, practitioners will continue to consider each child's individual circumstances, including their family relationships, culture, community and the places that are important to them. Decisions about safety, placement and permanency will continue to balance these factors in the child's best interests.

Implementation

Reforms will be introduced in stages to allow time for implementation planning, workforce development, system changes and supporting resources. Implementation will occur in stages:

- Stage 1 – from 31 August 2026: commencement of the first package of legislative reforms. This stage is also supported by updated policy, practice guidance and staff training.
- Stage 2 – from 1 December 2026: commencement of the Working with Children Check reforms.
- By March 2028: full implementation of all reforms, including workforce capability, supporting systems and structures, operational guidance and continuous improvement activities.