

Family-Led Pathways to Early Support

Why trust, not risk, is the starting point for early help

The Reily Foundation Inc

Presented to the Thriving Families SA Leadership Collective, Monday 7 September 2026

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Reily Foundation Inc acknowledges the Kaurna people as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work, and pays respect to Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families remain profoundly over-represented in the child protection system, and that the leadership for changing that sits with Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

Our position

We need systems that are as good at building trust as they are at identifying risk.

On Monday 7 September 2026, The Reily Foundation Inc took part in a panel discussion on family-led pathways to early support, convened by the Thriving Families SA Leadership Collective. This paper sets out the position we put to that conversation.

The Reily Foundation Inc works alongside parents who are navigating the child protection system. What we hear from them, consistently, is not that support is missing. It is that reaching for it feels dangerous. That is the problem this paper is about, and it is a solvable one.

IN BRIEF

- 1 Help-seeking is a strength, not a risk.** A parent who asks for support is showing insight and commitment, and the system should read it that way.
- 2 Trust is the foundation of early intervention.** Where families do not trust the system, they wait until crisis — and that delay is the risk.
- 3 Families need relationship pathways, not just referral pathways.** Self-referral, genuine choice and practical help delivered through a relationship are what make early support possible.

01 Families wait, because asking for help feels risky

Families often tell us they are afraid to ask for help. They worry that asking will bring judgement, or involvement from statutory systems. So they wait. They wait until the problem has become a crisis before they reach out.

Fear and shame rarely announce themselves. They show up as absence and as silence — the appointment that is not kept, the call that is not returned, the parent who says they are fine. The families who stop turning up are often the very families who need us the most.

Where there is no trust, families do not feel safe enough to be honest about what they are struggling with. That is where the real risk appears. A system that is excellent at detecting risk but poor at earning trust will keep meeting families late, at the point where its options are narrowest and most intrusive.

02 Help-seeking is a strength, not a warning sign

What parents want is for help-seeking to be recognised as a strength. A parent who asks for support is showing insight, responsibility and commitment to their family. That should be read as a protective factor, not as evidence that they are failing.

This is not a matter of tone or of language alone. Help-seeking is treated as a risk indicator in practice frameworks, in assessment tools and in the habits of busy services. Until it is named as protective in the places where decisions are actually recorded, families will go on reading the system accurately when they decide that silence is safer.

We also need to normalise the fact that parenting is hard. Every family needs support at some point. Asking for help at the right time is responsible parenting, not risky parenting.

03 What would need to change

For asking for help to become a sign of strength rather than a trigger for surveillance, three things need to change in the design of support.

Families need supports they can refer themselves to. A pathway that depends on someone else deciding a family is eligible, or worrying enough, will always arrive after the family already knew they needed it.

Families need genuine choice in how they engage, including the choice to say no to part of what is offered without losing the rest of it. Autonomy is not a courtesy extended to families who are doing well; it is the condition under which anyone accepts help.

And families need practical support delivered through a relationship — not through a referral form or an assessment process. Connection happens through relationships. The first question should be how a family wants to be supported, asked before any assessment is made.

04 What families tell us makes the difference

When we ask parents what made the difference, the same themes come back. Someone listened before assessing. Someone explained the system honestly and with transparency. Someone helped with something practical. And someone did not give up on them.

“The worker who made the difference was the one who treated me like a parent, not a problem.”

A parent, to The Reily Foundation Inc

None of those four things requires a new program. All of them require time, and permission, and a view of the family that starts from capability rather than from concern.

05 What we have seen at The Reily Foundation Inc

Since The Reily Foundation Inc introduced a self-referral appointment process, we have seen stronger engagement from parents, more meaningful participation, and more capacity across our service.

The reason is straightforward. Families who come to us do so when they are ready and willing, and readiness is the single largest determinant of whether support works. It also frees capacity, because we are no longer spending it on engagement that was never going to take hold — which means we can find other ways to walk alongside the families who are not as ready yet.

Self-referral does not replace outreach. It removes a barrier for families who are ready but blocked by the process, and it works alongside soft entry points designed to reach families who would never approach a formal service. The aim is to remove every barrier we can find.

06 What works as a soft entry point

What works is meeting families where they are: somewhere they feel safe, whether that is their community, a trusted service, or their own home. It means being mindful of who else is in the room, and making space for a support person if that is what the family wants.

Lived experience and peer workers make a particular difference, because families are more willing to reach out to someone who understands their journey and will walk alongside them rather than assess them. Some parents are not ready to engage in case management; peer support is how they build the capacity to get there.

The biggest lesson for us is that engagement works when it is family-led. When a family recognises for themselves that they are ready, they engage far more meaningfully than when support is imposed on them. We talk a great deal about warm referrals, but a referral on its own does not create engagement — families engage because they trust the person or the pathway. Semi-mandated referrals can disempower families even when they are made with the best of intentions.

07 What makes it harder: rules, funding and KPIs

Much of the system is still designed around crisis response rather than prevention. Services are funded to respond once a family meets a particular threshold of need, rather than when that family first starts struggling. Parents are consistently telling us that they want support early — practical help in the home, and the ability to self-refer before things escalate.

Workers are also pushed to prioritise reporting, compliance and other key performance indicators over relationship-building. Trust takes time, and time is the thing practitioners have least of. Relationship time is treated as overhead rather than as the practice itself, so it is the first thing squeezed when caseloads rise.

And poverty and neglect look very similar at first. An empty lunchbox, unwashed clothes, missed appointments. A system that cannot tell them apart ends up escalating families for being poor. Often those circumstances are exactly that — circumstantial — which is why the ability to have a conversation with curiosity and without judgement goes such a long way.

08 From reasonable effort to active effort

Under the Children and Young People (Safety and Support) Act, active efforts are not a value statement. They are a duty: timely, practicable, thorough and purposeful actions. In our view this is the single clearest lever available, and it is the one least translated into everyday practice.

In Support Before System, the practitioner training delivered by The Reily Foundation Inc, we give practitioners a ladder. At the bottom: "I gave mum a brochure." That is a passive response. In the middle: "I provided a referral." That is a reasonable effort, and it is where most of us sit. At the top: "I sat with mum and completed the referral. I followed up two weeks later. I helped organise transport. I brought the supports together. I checked whether the support actually worked." That is an active effort.

The distance between the middle rung and the top one is what a frontline worker could change tomorrow morning. It does not require a new program or new funding. It requires that the difference be named, taught and recorded.

Reporting is a legal obligation, and it is not a substitute for support. Where a practitioner does report, they should document their active efforts alongside it: what was offered, who was contacted, what changed. A report does not end a worker's role with a family.

09 What we would stop measuring, and what we would start

We are not arguing against accountability. We are arguing against placing so much value on measures that tell us what services did, rather than what families experienced.

We would be far less interested in how many referrals were made, how many appointments happened, or how quickly a case moved through a system, where those things come at the expense of trust. Families do not judge us by the number of contacts they receive. They judge us by whether they felt heard, respected, informed and supported.

What we would measure instead is whether people felt safe enough to seek help in the first place. Five questions carry most of it:

Safe Did families feel safe and respected? **Clear** Did they understand what was happening? **Choice** Did they have genuine voice and choice in what was offered? **Early** Did they get support before crisis? **Again** Would they use the service again, or encourage someone else to?

10 What none of us can do alone

The biggest opportunity in front of this sector is building trust in a way that no single organisation can achieve on its own. Trust is created when families experience consistency across the system. If one organisation says "we are here to help" and the next responds with judgement, the whole system loses its credibility — and the family loses the little they had left.

Together we can create family-led pathways where support is coordinated, relationships are prioritised, and families are not left to navigate services on their own. Families should not have to tell their story ten times, or work out for themselves which door is the right one.

The answer is not always more services. It is better connections between the services and community supports we already have.

11 Aboriginal leadership

At the Leadership Collective, this part of the conversation was led by Aboriginal panellists and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, as it should be. The Reily Foundation Inc does not speak for Aboriginal families, and we are not the right organisation to describe what cultural safety requires.

What we can speak to is what we ask of ourselves as a mainstream service. We can follow Aboriginal leadership rather than restate it. We can examine our own decision-making for the points at which cultural bias quietly changes an outcome. We can carry the work of naming racism in this system rather than leaving Aboriginal people to do the truth-telling and absorb the cost of it. And we can resource Aboriginal-led organisations to lead, instead of designing around them.

12 “Doesn’t this put children at risk?”

It is a fair question, and it deserves a direct answer.

This is not about whether practitioners report. It is about what the first response is. A practitioner can be transparent with a family about reporting, explain what will happen and why, and still act. Trust makes families more likely to be honest, and honesty is what keeps children safe.

The reverse is what should worry us. Where there is no trust, families hide what they are struggling with, and a system that only ever sees what families are willing to disclose under threat is a system operating on bad information. Building trust is not the soft alternative to child safety. It is the mechanism.

What we are calling for

Eight changes that would make asking for help safer, and earlier.

- 1 Fund family support at the first sign of struggle, not at the point a family meets a statutory threshold. Prevention cannot be delivered on crisis-response funding.
- 2 Make self-referral a standard entry point to family support, and resource services to hold it. Families who come when they are ready engage more meaningfully, and the capacity that frees up can be directed to families who are not ready yet.
- 3 Fund and count relationship time explicitly. Trust takes time; while time sits outside what is funded and measured, it will keep being the first thing cut.
- 4 Name help-seeking as a protective factor in assessment frameworks, practice guidance and workforce training, so that reaching out early improves a family's position rather than worsening it.
- 5 Build soft entry points around peer and lived-experience workers, located where families already feel safe, with the family choosing how and when they engage.
- 6 Operationalise active efforts under the Children and Young People (Safety and Support) Act. Define in practice guidance what passive, reasonable and active responses look like, and require active efforts to be documented alongside any report.
- 7 Separate poverty from neglect at the decision point, with practice guidance that distinguishes them and a material-support response available to workers who identify the difference.

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Measure family experience alongside service activity, using the five questions above: safe, clear, choice, early, again — reported publicly and used to adjust practice.

The question isn't whether support exists.

It's whether families feel safe enough to ask for it.

About The Reily Foundation Inc

The Reily Foundation Inc is a South Australian not-for-profit organisation that works alongside parents navigating the child protection system, and delivers Support Before System, a practitioner training program on early support and active efforts.

This paper was prepared by Tahni Bickley, Program & Practice Manager, from the position The Reily Foundation Inc put to the Thriving Families SA Leadership Collective panel on family-led pathways to early support, Monday 7 September 2026. It sits alongside our submissions to the South Australian Child and Family Support System State Strategy and to Child and Family Focus SA's consultation on the Second Action Plan.