



Step by Step

THRIVING YOUNG FAMILIES INITIATIVE

EVIDENCE, LEARNING AND EVALUATION SUMMARY

APRIL 2026

The Step by Step Thriving Young Families Initiative is a transformative program that backs vulnerable young parents and their families. Leveraging government and philanthropic funding, the initiative has created an integrated model that wraps a package of support around a young family tailored to their needs, goals and

hopes for the future. The program aims to resource strong and proud young families where children thrive, learn and grow.

Commencing in 2021, the initiative is funded by the Australian Department of Social Services and Hand Heart Pocket, the Charity of Freemasons Queensland.

the science of knowing
Research that matters



Australian Government
Department of Social Services



The Thriving Young Families integrated service model

Young parents in Logan face intersecting challenges. Traditional service systems often respond to these issues in silos, requiring families to repeat their stories as they attempt to navigate multiple agencies. Thriving Young Families was designed to address this fragmentation.

The program uses an evidence-informed, integrated service model consisting of four core components and four reinforcing components.

Families can choose to engage intensively or lightly, step their support up or down, and re-enter the program when new challenges arise.



“We can now be the parents our children need.”

Evaluation approach

To answer the evaluation questions, The Science of Knowing used two fit-for-purpose evaluation frameworks:

1. Realist approach – to identify the causal mechanisms that link activities with outcomes
 2. Cost-benefit analysis – to measure value for money.
- 150 clients, who commenced in 2022-23 or 2023-24, were included in the evaluation.

Key findings

- » The integrated, relational, and early intervention model produces measurable outcomes.
- » Effectiveness appears strongest when engagement is sustained and families access multiple integrated supports.
- » Housing and safety are critical foundations upon which confidence, employment and parenting gains are built.
- » Flexible funding arrangements allow for adaptive rather than rigid responses.
- » The program generates economic value exceeding its cost.

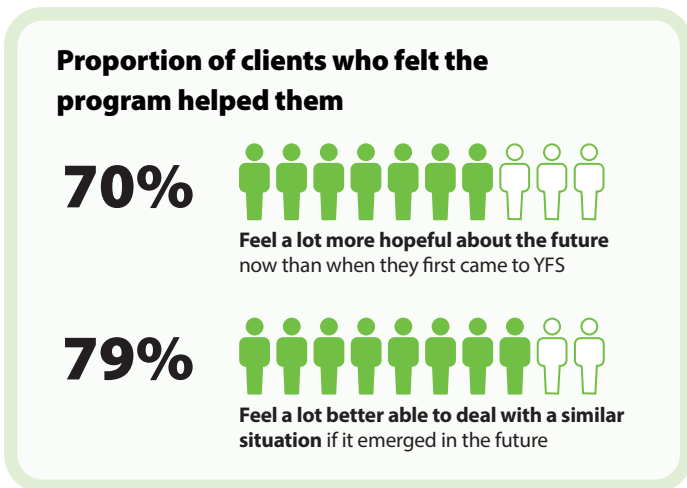
How has Thriving Young Families benefited young families?

The evaluation found that young families thrive when support is **relational, respectful, flexible, empowering, culturally responsive and safe**.

Parents described feeling listened to, understood and treated as capable rather than deficient. This relational foundation was central to engagement and trust, and particularly important for families who had experienced trauma, domestic and family violence (DFV), homelessness or negative prior interactions with services.

Families valued being able to adjust their level of engagement, pause participation when overwhelmed, and return without stigma. This design feature recognises the realities of young parenthood and complex life circumstances.

The majority of clients (70%) felt the program helped them feel a lot more hopeful about the future and 79% felt a lot better able to deal with a similar situation if it emerged in the future. These results suggest that the program builds clients' self-efficacy, helping them to grow in confidence and resilience for the future.

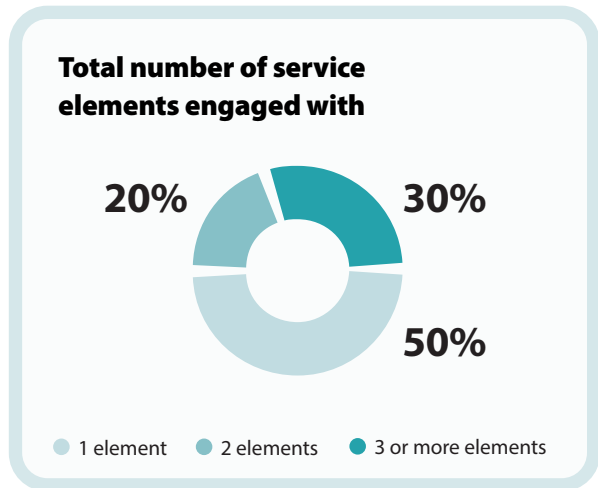


What is the ideal type and level of support for young parents over time?

Program engagement

50% of clients engaged with multiple program components. Those with higher needs tended to engage with a greater number of services.

- » 71% engaged with Family Resource Practitioners
- » 49% engaged with the peer-based community connections groups
- » 33% engaged with the program's housing specialist
- » 21% received support from the program's employment specialist.



The evidence demonstrates that effective support for young families is episodic and responsive.

For many families, engagement begins with high-intensity crisis intervention, particularly in relation to housing and safety. These foundational improvements create the conditions necessary for progress in other domains. As stability increases, support shifts toward consolidation and skill-building.



The proportion of clients in **stable, affordable and appropriate housing** increased significantly



The proportion of clients who **felt 'very safe'** increased significantly

Parents reported greater confidence, improved goal-setting and stronger problem-solving capacity. Importantly, the ability to re-engage when new challenges arise was highly valued and reduces the risk of future crises escalating.

The length and level of engagement in the program made a considerable difference to participant outcomes. Statistically significant improvements were observed for:

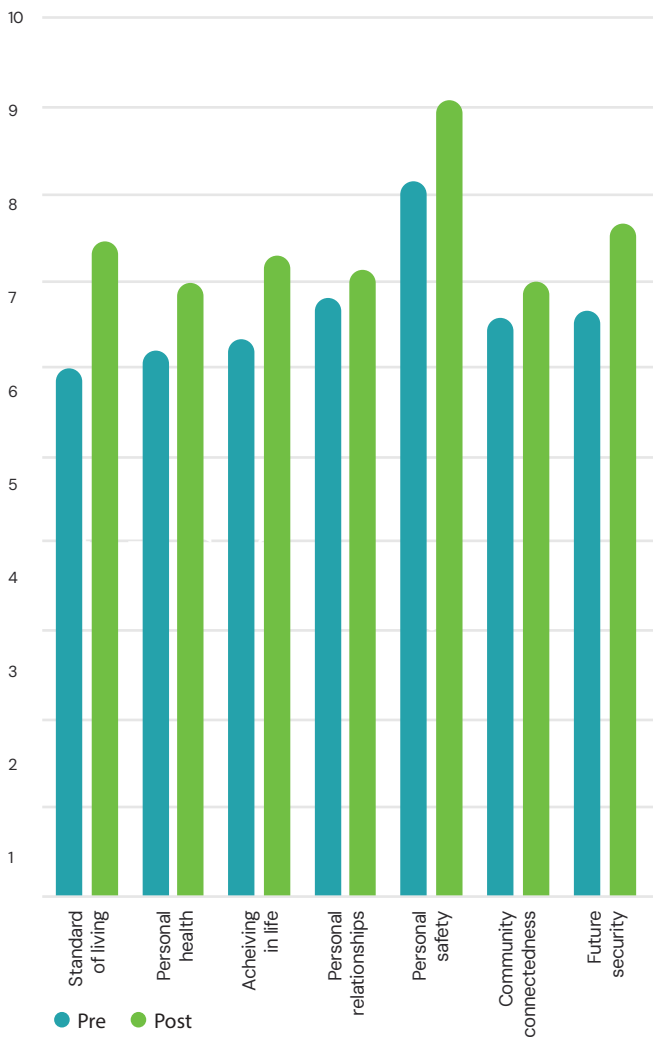
- » clients who were supported for more than 12 months
- » clients who engaged with three or more program elements.

"If I won lotto, I'd invest in Step-by-Step and safe housing for people to grow and heal."

What works for at-risk young parents and their children to thrive?

Key outcomes

Overall parent wellbeing increased from 66.2 to 73.8. The pre-program PWI score for clients falls well below the normative range for Australian adults (74.11-76.75) while the post-program score is almost within the normative range.



These outcomes have the potential to change the trajectory of young families' lives and lead to significant economic benefits – for the families involved and wider society.

Participating families also experienced statistically significant improvements in key areas of life¹, including:

- » housing
- » household resources
- » physical health
- » connections and culture
- » child wellbeing
- » financial capability
- » education and training
- » resilience
- » confidence
- » life skills
- » employment
- » parenting knowledge and skills

Parents spoke of feeling independent rather than alone, knowing where to seek help, and being able to handle challenges without panic. They reported:

- » increased confidence and self-efficacy
- » improved ability to plan, prioritise and problem-solve
- » greater stability in housing, employment and education
- » improved understanding of healthy relationships and parenting.

Does service integration offer more benefits than traditional delivery models?

The integrated model is a defining feature of Thriving Young Families and a key driver of impact.

Factors such as co-location, shared databases, and informal communication – as well as structured collaborative meetings – enabled rapid internal coordination between the team, quicker decision-making and problem solving and better alignment of support with client needs. This resulted in responsive service delivery to clients, without lengthy referral processes, reducing clients' emotional and logistical load and service fatigue.

Effective integration requires sustained leadership, role negotiation and a strong team culture. Investment in external supervision, training, and professional development opportunities for staff is required to support integrated practice.

¹Measured using the Thriving Matrix, a bespoke outcomes measurement tool. A p-value of 0.05 was used as the cut-off for statistical significance.

Are there potential long-term cost savings from integrated service delivery models?

The cost-benefit analysis using the WELLBY framework² demonstrates that the program generates substantial economic value that exceeds its cost of delivery. Over a three-year period, the program returns **\$2.51 in benefits for every dollar invested** under the base case, and \$1.45 under the more conservative scenario.

Economic estimates are based solely on improvements in participants' wellbeing as measured by the PWI, a deliberately narrow foundation that substantially understates the program's full economic contribution. It excludes additional fiscal savings associated with:

- » Prevention of homelessness and housing churn
- » Reduced escalation to high-risk DFV responses
- » Earlier engagement with health and child development services
- » Increased workforce participation and engagement in education/training
- » Reduced duplication across services

These mechanisms represent a substantial layer of economic value that sits above and beyond the WELLBY estimates in this evaluation.



"I feel independent, not alone."

For every \$1 invested, Thriving Young Families returns...

CONSERVATIVE SCENARIO

\$1.45

Stress-tests the ROI under very conservative assumptions

Total 3-year benefits: \$4.3M

to

BASE CASE SCENARIO

\$2.51

Cautious central estimate grounded in best available evidence

Total 3-year benefits: \$7.4M

Breakeven = \$1.00 Both scenarios exceed breakeven

Benefits capture wellbeing improvements (PWI) over 3 years only. Fiscal savings from reduced homelessness, child protection costs and DFV responses are excluded - making these estimates conservative.

The program model is deliberately intensive, as it combines co-located services, sustained relational support, peer programs and coordinated case management for a population facing multiple, compounding disadvantages. This design carries a cost, and that cost is proportionate to the complexity of the families it serves. Lighter-touch models serving this population are likely to show lower engagement and weaker outcomes.

² A WELLBY (Wellbeing-Adjusted Life Year) represents a one-point improvement in life satisfaction on a 0–10 scale sustained for one person over one year.

Summary and recommendations

The Thriving Young Families evaluation demonstrates that integrated, relational early intervention models can produce measurable improvements in housing, safety and wellbeing, while also delivering positive economic returns. The program's effectiveness appears strongest when engagement is sustained and when families access multiple integrated supports.

The findings suggest several implications for the program's sustainability and scale:

1. Preserve the relational foundation of the model as a key driver of effectiveness
2. Maintain flexibility in engagement to facilitate long-term outcomes and cost savings
3. Invest in ongoing leadership to support integration
4. Strengthen data collection to capture the program's full social and fiscal benefits
5. Consider pathways for sustaining and potentially expanding the model.

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