

## The Lighthouse Project: Recent Initiatives to Navigate Australian Families Safely Through Parental Separation

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**Abstract :** A recent study of 8500 adult Australians aged 16 and over revealed 62% had experienced childhood maltreatment. In response to multiple recommendations by bodies such as the Australian Law Reform Commission, parliamentary reports and stakeholder input, a number of key initiatives have been developed to grapple with the difficulties of a federal-state system and to screen and triage high-risk families navigating their way through the court system. The Lighthouse Project (LHP) is a world-first initiative of the Federal Circuit and Family Courts in Australia (FCFOCA) to screen family law litigants for major risk factors, including family violence, child abuse, alcohol or substance abuse and mental ill-health at the point of filing in all applications that seek parenting orders. It commenced on 7 December 2020 on a pilot basis but has now been expanded to 15 registries across the country. A specialist risk screen, Family DOORS, Triage has been developed - focused on improving the safety and wellbeing of families involved in the family law system safety planning and service referral, and - differentiated case management based on risk level, with the Evatt List specifically designed to manage the highest risk cases. Early signs are that this approach is meeting the needs of families with multiple risks moving through the Court system. Before the LHP, there was no data available about the prevalence of risk factors experienced by litigants entering the family courts and it was often assumed that it was the litigation process that was fueling family violence and other risks such as suicidality. Data from the 2022 FCFOCA annual report indicated that in parenting proceedings, 70% alleged a child had been or was at risk of abuse, 80% alleged a party had experienced Family Violence, 74 % of children had been exposed to Family Violence, 53% alleged through substance misuse by party children had caused or was at risk of causing harm to children and 58% of matters allege mental health issues of a party had caused or placed a child at risk of harm. Those figures reveal the significant overlap between child protection and family violence, both of which are under the responsibility of state and territory governments. Since 2020, a further key initiative has been the co-location of child protection and police officials amongst a number of registries of the FCFOCA. The ability to access in a time-effective way details of family violence or child protection orders, weapons licenses, criminal convictions or proceedings is key to managing issues across the state and federal divide. It ensures a more cohesive and effective response to family law, family violence and child protection systems.

**Keywords :** child protection, family violence, parenting, risk screening, triage.

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