

IFAS final evaluation summary

IFAS has a huge impact. Like, a lot of families don't know their rights and have trouble speaking up when it comes to Child Protection, it means they can be the voice.

Parent



About IFAS

Independent Family Advocacy and Support (IFAS) provides non-legal advocacy to parents and primary carers in the early stages of child protection involvement. IFAS aims to support informed decision-making and engagement between families and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH), to resolve issues and avoid court proceedings where possible.

IFAS prioritises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, families where one or both parents have an intellectual disability, and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. We also work with clients where an unborn report has been made.

Our model supports people to speak up for themselves and their families, helps clarify their views and concerns and fosters improved understanding of their situation and the child protection system.

IFAS operates in Northern Melbourne, Greater Bendigo and Ballarat. IFAS employs four advocates and also has a client advisory group called Shared Experience and Support (SEaS) and a Lived Experience Consultant. In 2020-21, IFAS provided support to 150 families.

The evaluation

The IFAS pilot was independently evaluated by RMIT's Social and Global Studies Centre over three years.



Key findings

Parents said:

- IFAS helped them understand child protection processes
- IFAS helped them speak up for themselves and stand up for their rights
- IFAS supported them to express themselves in a way that helped them to communicate better with child protection
- They trusted IFAS workers
- IFAS helped to link them to other services they needed such as legal services
- IFAS helped child protection work with them to support their children.

I'm going to cry [laughs]. Because it's been a **difficult time** and I think, with families that's going through so much, I think, to have that extra help, just extra guidance, you feel like, you know, at least there's **someone there for you** that can understand you, that's not going to judge you and so forth. So, I think everyone, if they have someone like that, like an **advocate**, like me, it will help them too.

Parent



She was very, very helpful. I would email her if I had any questions, and she was straight on it. So I had the **most awesome experience**.

Aboriginal parent



IFAS successfully reached priority groups

25% of clients during the pilot phase were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and 20% were parents with an intellectual disability. Parents reported that they felt their culture and identity was respected by the service.

Most child protection practitioners and other key stakeholders found IFAS was helpful.

Child protection workers said:

- IFAS helped parents and child protection to communicate better
- IFAS helped parents to understand child protection's concerns
- IFAS helped child protection workers to understand parents' concerns.

IFAS helped families avoid court

One in five client families supported by IFAS avoided going to court for their child protection matter.

IFAS saves money

By helping at least 20% of families avoid court, IFAS saves the Victorian Government \$2.66 for every dollar invested. It can also reduce the length of time that child protection is involved with families.



Recommendations and suggestions

- IFAS should be expanded and made available to any parent or care giver who wants support in the pre-court stages of the child protection system in Victoria.
- IFAS should expand its priority groups to include people experiencing mental health issues, people who use drugs and people who experience family violence.
- IFAS should work with Child Protection to increase workforce knowledge about its advocacy model
- IFAS should continue consulting their lived experience consultant and client advisory group, to ensure the service continues to meet the needs of families.

Next steps

- IFAS received Victorian Government funding to continue the service in current locations until June 2024.
- We will speak to our partners in Child Protection, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and other services to continue promoting the service, increase understanding of the IFAS model and discuss opportunities for continuous improvement.
- We will also explore options to expand IFAS state-wide so that all eligible families can access this service.
- Follow www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/about-us/what-we-do/independent-family-advocacy-and-support