

EARLY YEARS CATALYST

A deep dive into mental models shaping Early
Child Development systems & outcomes

In Australia



About Us



Amy Finlay-Jones



Jaida Penny

Ngalla kaaditj Wadjuk Nyoongar Moort, Kayan kaaditj nidja boodja

I respectfully acknowledge the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation as the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which I live and work. I wish to pay my deep respects to Elders past and present, and gratefully acknowledge the generous contribution of Aboriginal researchers, families, and communities to the work that we do. I extend a warm welcome to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here with us today.



Our Team

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Our thanks to our **Consumer Advisory Group, Professional Advisory Group**, and everyone who contributed to our consultation process.

Background

In late 2021, EYC commissioned Orange Compass to undertake a Systems Mapping process to identify factors influencing ECD outcomes in Australia.

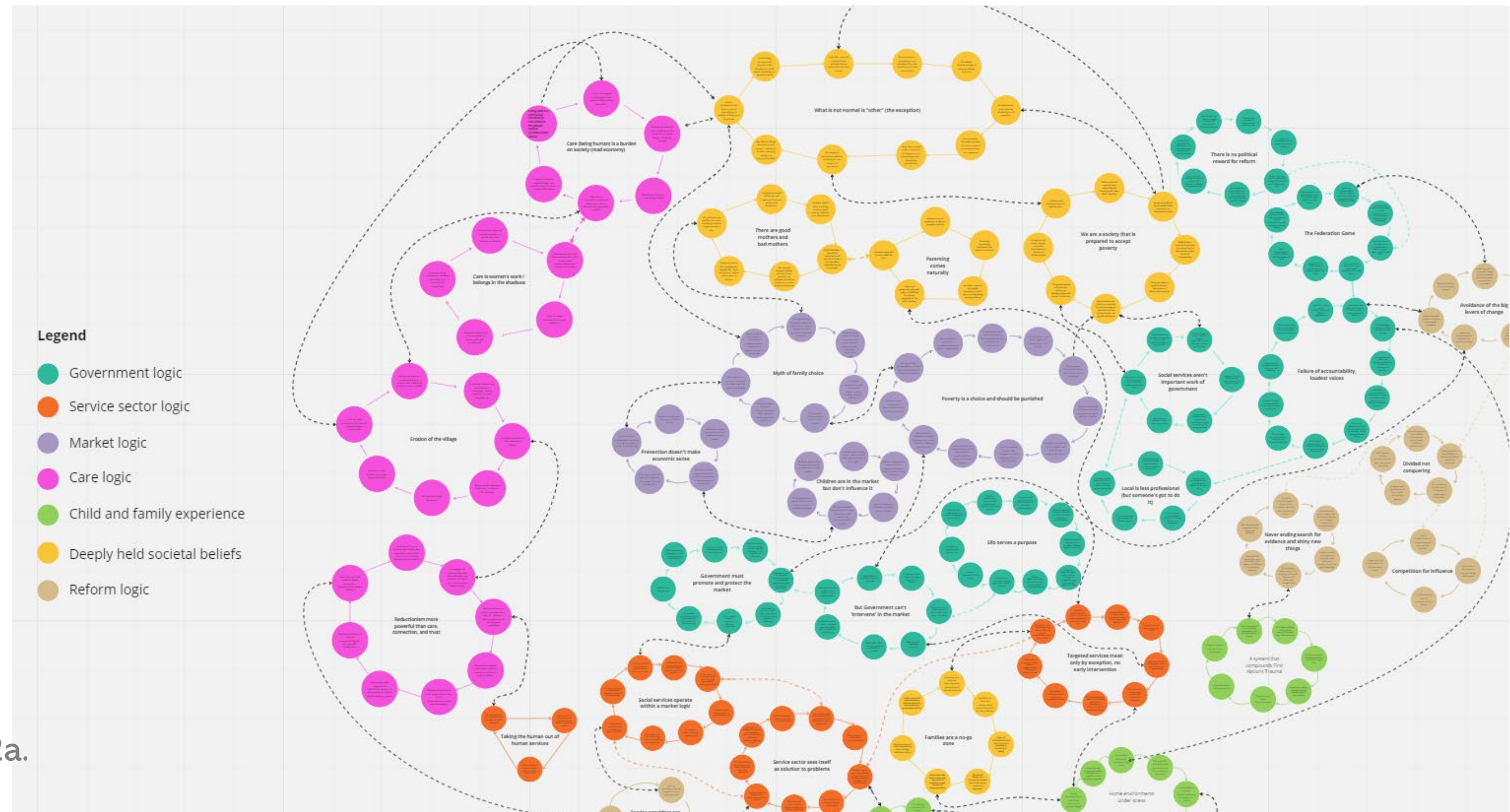
They found:

- A complex array of interconnected current state issues (how things are)
- A set of desired state outcomes (how things could be)
- A range of possible leverage points to get us from how things are, to how they could be

McKenzie & Millar, 2022a,b.

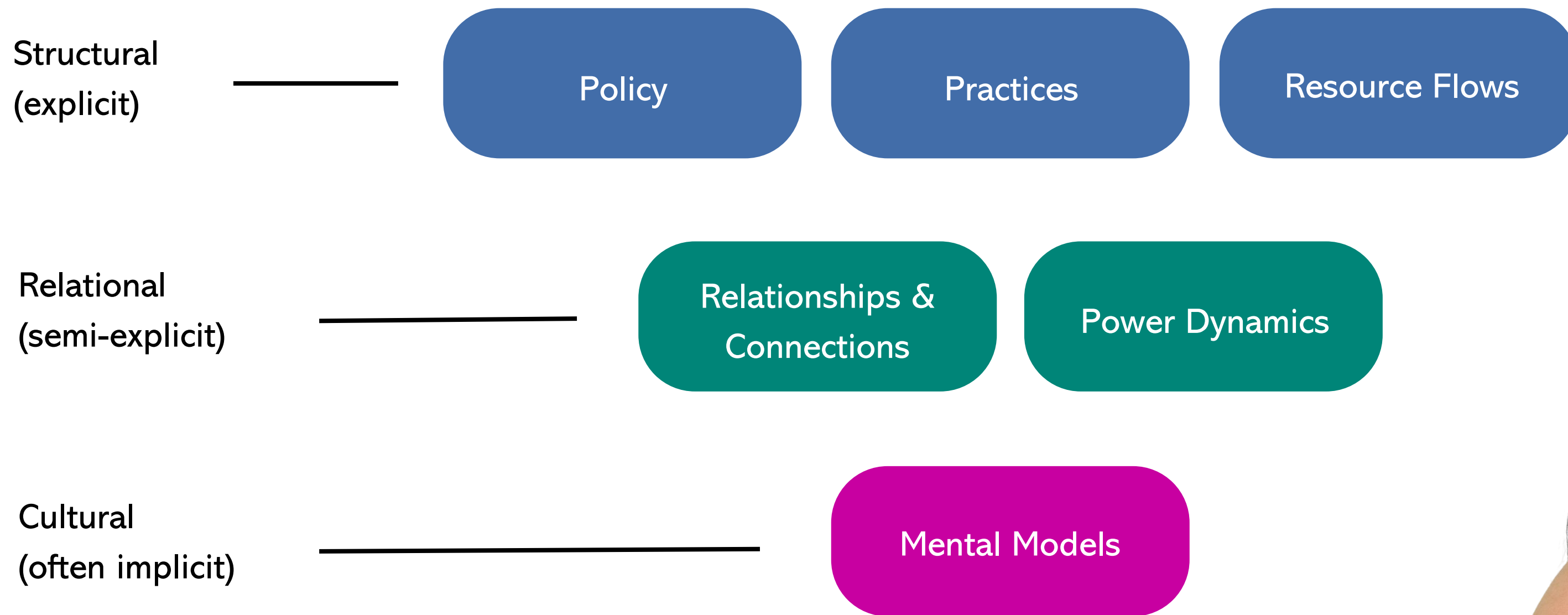


Understanding the current state



McKenzie & Millar, 2022a.

Understanding the current state



Adapted from Kasia et al., 2018.



What are mental models?

Deeply held societal beliefs or narratives that influence the way we see the world, including our expectations, values, and norms.

- Often unstated.
- May be outside awareness.
- Not necessarily true.
- Not necessarily something you personally believe.
- Can be confronting.



Courageous Conversation Norms

Stay Engaged

We make a conscious effort to "remain morally, emotionally, intellectually and socially involved in the dialogue"

Experience Discomfort

We acknowledge that discomfort is inevitable, especially in dialogue about inequity and make a commitment to bring issues into the open.

Speak Your Truth

We commit to being open about our thoughts and feelings and not just saying what we think others want to hear

Expect and Accept Nonclosure

We can hang out in uncertainty and not rush to quick solutions, especially in relation to deep systemic bias and stigma which requires ongoing dialogue.

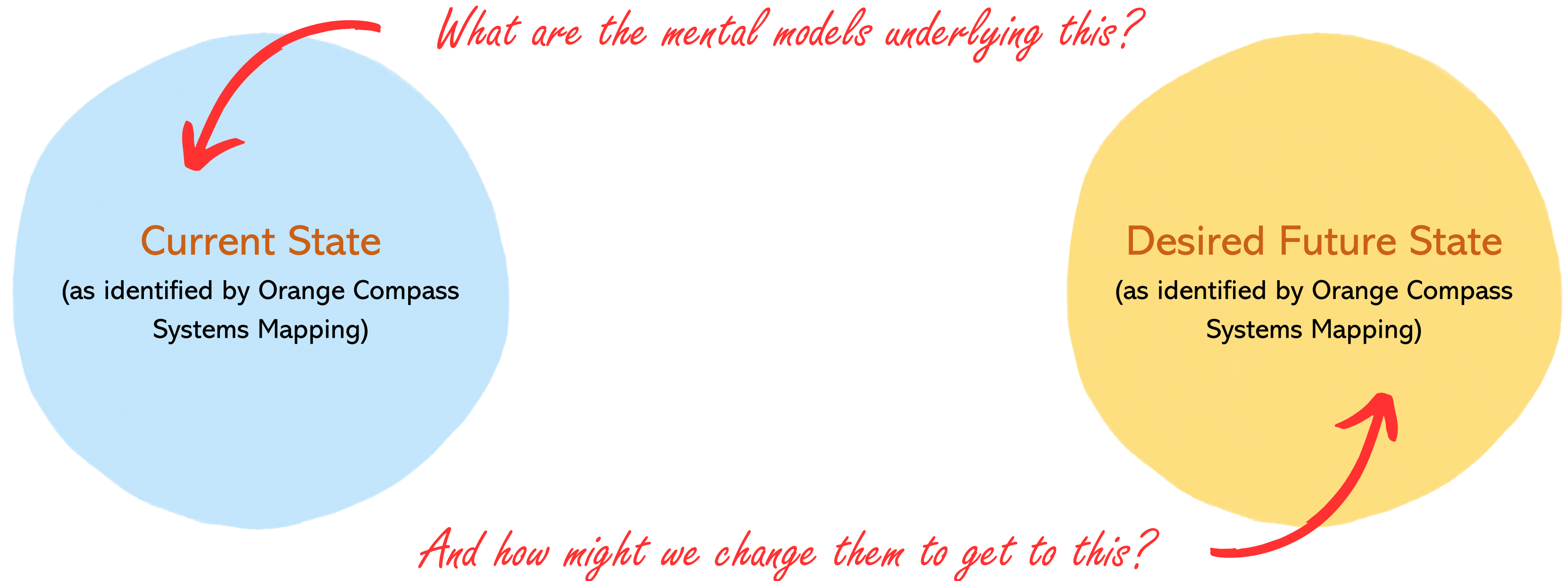
Why focus on changing mental models

Mental models fundamentally influence :

- How we define the problem
- What we see as viable solutions
- Whose voices are prioritised



Scope of this Project



Methods

Stage 1 -Deep Dives

- Synthesis of published evidence
- Interviews and focus groups with general public, families, ECD service providers, and subject matter experts, including specific focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Stage 2 -Co-Design

- Workshops to explore implementation recommendations



Data Sources

FrameWorks Institute

Australian public opinion data

Social media comments on current/desired state issues

Interviews and focus groups

Literature reviews

FrameWorks Institute

MAJOR MENTAL MODELS

01

Individualism. The assumption that problems are the result of individual choices, values, and behaviours, rather than broader societal issues. Assumes that solutions are also individual. For example, *poverty is a choice and should be punished.*

02

Us vs them thinking. The assumption that another social group, preference, or experience is fundamentally different (and usually inferior) our own. For example, *there are 'good mothers' and 'bad mothers.'*

03

Fatalism. The assumption that an issue cannot be fixed because the problem is too large or complex, or those in charge of solving it are not motivated or competent enough to do so. For example, *big reform is impossible.*

Framing for change

Issue framing refers to the way a problem or topic is presented or described, which influences how people understand the issue, which in turn affects their behaviour.

- Different frames may be required for different audiences
- Evidence demonstrates that changing framing can influence attitudes and behaviours.



Prior work in Australia

- Differences between ECD sector and public understanding, about **effective parenting**.
- Clear and robust evidence that communications need to focus on how policies and practices benefit **child development** rather than how they promote **effective parenting**.
- **Implementation is key.**
- <https://www.parentingrc.org.au/programs/reframing-parenting/>

L'Hote et al., 2017; Parenting Research Centre, 2014-23; Volmert et al., 2016



Prior work in Australia

- Notable differences between ECD sector and public understanding of **what influences ECD**, who is responsible for it, and what can be done about it.
- Progress has been made on increasing public awareness of the science of ECD, but now we need to **broaden the narrative**.

Kendall-Taylor et al., 2023



Our Project - Key Themes

- Mental models about children and who is responsible for them
- Mental models about the nature of child development and what shapes it
- Mental models about the nature and role of governments
- Mental models about inequities
- Mental models about racism
- Mental models about systems
- Mental models about parents and parenting

MM1. Parents are the primary influence on child development

What people told us

- “Mothers are the primary influence on their child’s outcomes”
- “Mums returning to working full time are neglecting their children”
- “Parents are the most important thing for kids”



MM2. Children are not a collective responsibility

What people told us

- “The government is not responsible for the difficulties families face”
- “Parents are ultimately responsible for the wellbeing of their children”
- “Parenting is a private and personal thing”



MM2. Children are not a collective responsibility

Social Media Analysis

- “Shouldn’t people plan ahead and decide if and how they can afford to have and raise children? **Why do I have to pay my taxes for someone who just expects the government (we the taxpayers) to pay for everything?**”
- “Simple answer to this, **bring up your own children.** Don’t leave it to others and then complain that you have to actually pay for the service they are providing you. It’s called living within your means. Greed is the problem, not the government or the early childhood industry.”



MM2. Children are not a collective responsibility

Social Media Analysis

“Parents should pay for their own life choices – why should the taxpayer subsidise others’ decisions?”

“Oh dear! Surely, it’s a social investment not just a personal good.”

“Hospitals, education and transport are social investment. Paying for others’ families is just socialism. Pay for your own family.”



Other mental models about children & govt.

MM3. Children are not fully-formed humans

MM4. Children are resilient, and child development is simple

MM5. Government involvement means there's something wrong with you

MM6. Governments can't be trusted

Possible Implications

- People recognize the importance of ECD, but **they do not see child wellbeing as a social issue;** they think that improving ECD is about educating parents.
- Governments not expected by society to act with children's best interests in mind; **children not seen by society to be a policy priority.**
- Government's role in **promoting better ECD outcomes** is met with confusion and suspicion; resistance to Govt initiatives even in the face of strong evidence.
- Societal expectation that **care for children can and should be handled by families.**
- Parents under pressure; **help-seeking is stigmatised.**

Kendall-Taylor et al., 2023

Recommendations for Change

Engaging public support for Govt investment in ECD

What not to do	Why it is harmful
Frame children in terms of their future potential or return on investment. (L'Hote et al., 2020).	Undermines the importance of children in their own right & reduces them to a means of economic efficiency. Can invoke polarised opinion re whether promoting ECD contributes to social good or not.
Use specifiers such as "working parents" when talking about parents. (L'Hote & Volmert, 2021).	Can make stereotypes about families who “expect the government to pay for everything” more salient and invoke us vs them thinking (e.g., deserving parents vs non-deserving parents).
Foreground messages about parents (L'Hote et al., 2017).	Leading with messages about parents can invoke “us vs them” thinking (i.e., those who choose to have children versus everyone else) and judgements (good vs bad) and can bring mental models about children being parent’s responsibility to the forefront.

A note on the following slides

The following slides contain deficit-based language that is highly stigmatising.

These statements largely represent the lived experience of people from marginalised social and cultural groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and those with lived experience of disability. **To give voice to those with this lived experience, we have presented it in the way it was told to us.**

Where statements were made by people from dominant social and cultural groups they largely represent perceptions of cultural models (i.e., what the majority believe) rather than individual beliefs.

Please take care when engaging in this content, particularly if it is close to your own lived experience.

MM7. Australia is a meritocracy & MM8. Life is tough, deal with it

What people told us

- "With enough hard work, anyone can succeed"
- "Poverty is the result of bad choices"
- "Poverty is the result of failure to take advantage of opportunities"
- "Poverty is the result of not being tough enough"



MM7. Australia is a meritocracy &

MM8. Life is tough, deal with it

What published evidence tells us

- The 2019 Mapping Social Cohesion survey found:
 - Only 19% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that "Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life"
 - In 2022, this figure was down to 14%



MM7. Australia is a meritocracy &

MM8. Life is tough, deal with it

What published evidence tells us

62%

disagree

“Anyone can work
their way out of
poverty if they try
hard enough”

86% agree

“No one deserves
to live in poverty”

52% agree

“Most Australians
are sympathetic to
those living in
poverty”

Anglicare Australia, 2018.



MM9. You get what you deserve.

What people told us

- "There are good parents and bad parents"
- "You (migrants) should be grateful to be here"
- "Wealthy families deserve better quality care"
- "Government services are only good enough for people who can't afford better"



MM10. People with disabilities don't hold equal value in Australian society.

What people told us

- "My children might be disadvantaged if they play with children with disabilities"
- "Children with disabilities are unpredictable"
- "Children with disabilities aren't as cute"
- "With less intellectual capacity, you are less valuable to society"



MM11. White is right.

What people told us

- "Aboriginal people aren't educated"
- "Aboriginal people are dependent on welfare"
- "Aboriginal parents are bad parents"
- "Aboriginal people aren't capable of self-governing"
- "All Aboriginal children have experienced trauma or domestic violence"



MM11. White is right.

What published evidence tells us

- 2022 Mapping Social Cohesion survey found:
 - 87% of respondents agreed that 'it is important for Indigenous histories and cultures to be included in the curriculum'
 - Only 38% of respondents agreed that 'ethnic minorities in Australia should be given Australian Government assistance to maintain their customs and traditions.'

O'Donnell, 2022.



MM12. Racism is not a problem.

What people told us

- "Racism doesn't exist"
- "Racism is just 'a few bad apples'"
- "Colonisation was ages ago - get over it"
- "I'm not racist so it's not my problem"
- "The system favours Aboriginal people."



MM13. Racism is inevitable.

What people told us

- "I won't stand up for racism because people won't change"
- "I'm wasting my time and energy trying to solve this"
- "I don't want to stand up to racism because I don't want to cause a fuss"



MM14. Racism is warranted.

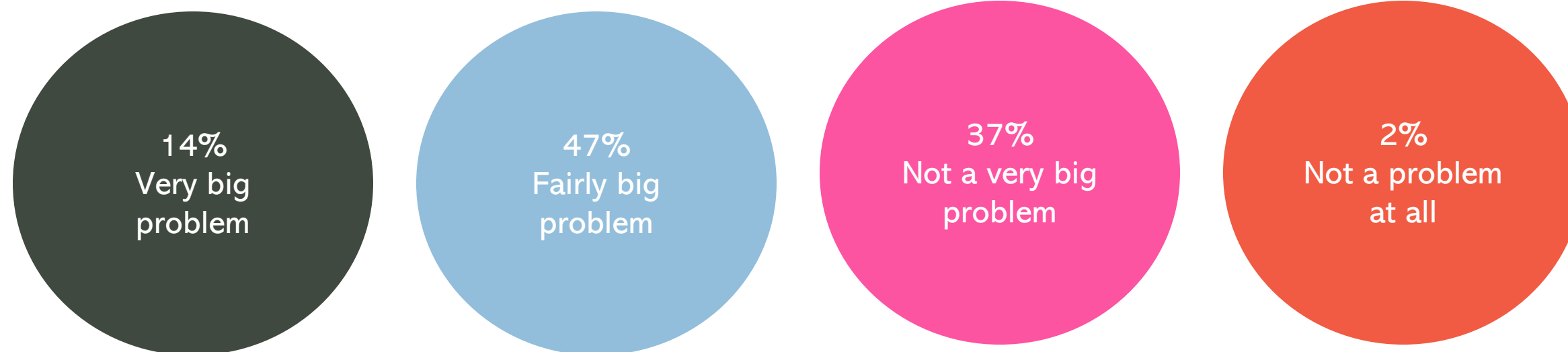
What people told us

- "Racist stereotypes reflect reality"
- "Aboriginal people and ways are 'primitive'"
- "Aboriginal people are to blame for their problems"
- "Aboriginal Australians will take our (white people's) land/jobs"



What published evidence tells us

- Peacock et al. 2021 found:
 - While parents of Aboriginal children maintain very high expectations of their children across their schooling years, teachers' expectations decrease substantially over the same period.
- In 2022, the Mapping Social Cohesion survey found mixed beliefs around racism:



O'Donnell, 2022; Peacock, 2021.



Possible Implications

- Undermines support for government action on poverty because those who mistakenly assume that others don't share their compassionate values (i.e., around poverty) are less likely to act on them
- Deficit narratives regarding Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, and people from culturally diverse backgrounds are pervasive and undermine their prosperity at every level.
- Denial of racism and misunderstanding of systematic racism impedes coordinated action to address it.

Recommendations for Change

Addressing mental models about inequities in child development

What to do	Why it helps
Change parental beliefs about investment in child development. (List, Pernaudet, & Suskind, 2021).	Evidence demonstrates that parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to believe that parental investment in children can promote ECD outcomes. However, these beliefs can be changed (e.g., through exposure to home visiting programs), with knock-on effects on parent behaviour.
Changing educators' expectations of First Nations children. (Peacock et al., 2021).	Promote the relationships and communication between parents and teachers and provide training to teachers to address inherent biases that might influence their expectations.
Changing media representations of First Nations Australians	Adopt a positive, strengths-based narrative of First Nations Australians in media to counteract persistent deficit-based framing.

Recommendations for Change

Strategies for addressing racism and its impact on children

What to do	Why it helps
Call it what it is (Nelson, 2013; Sweetland, 2023).	Highlight racism as the problem to be solved rather than “bad apples” or those who are victims of racism; helps to counter narratives of denial or distancing.
Extend public understanding of what racism means. (Sweetland, 2023).	Helps to frame racism as part of a system of inequity and provides a starting point for the idea that if systems of inequity have been designed, they can be redesigned.
Highlight that change is possible and how. (Sweetland, 2023).	Helps to overcome ideas that racism is inevitable or too hard to address (i.e., fatalism).

Reflection

We have shared the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have had first-hand interactions with these mental models.

Our approach is one of truth-telling and in line with our Courageous Conversation norms, we commit to presenting these findings with authenticity so that we can give a voice to our people to share their experiences and form recommendations for change.

MM15. Systems answer to no-one and

MM16. Systems failures are other people's problems

What people told us

- "Systems just evolve - no one is responsible for them."
- "Systems failures are inevitable and unavoidable"
- "The system is an entity unto itself"
- "It's an out-of-control behemoth - how could anyone keep the systems working together?"



MM17. Families deserve a choice - if they can afford it

What people told us

- "Higher cost means better value"
- "Wealthy families have earned their right to have more choice and better options"
- "Wealthy families deserve better quality care"



Possible Implications

- Preferences toward **market-based systems** as a means of providing value and choice to families
- Govt. initiatives viewed as good enough for “those” people but not for me.
- Market and systems failures viewed as failures of individuals; people feel unable to change the system but motivated to work harder to make the system work for them (or give up).

Exploring Possible Implications

Support for system that
reinforces inequity

"If I try hard enough, I can
make the system work for
me"

Preference for
market-based
systems

"Higher cost and more
specialised means a better
service"

Support for system that
reinforces inequity

"Systems failures are other
people's problems"

Distancing from "those
people"

"Govt service are good
enough for some people but
not for me"

"I have earned the right to
choose (something
different)"

Mental Models about inequity &
those who experience it

"Govt involvement means
children are at risk "

MM18. Parenting is easy

What people told us

- "It's like people believe parenting is easy, that anyone can do it"
- "Staying at home is easy"
- "Young children can entertain themselves"



MM19. Providing care is integral to women's identity and power

What people told us

- "Supporting children is integral to maternal identity"
- "Women enjoy providing care"
- "Child development is the last bastion of women's influence"



MM20. Men are not nurturers

What people told us

- "Men don't have a natural parenting instinct"
- "Dads don't know what they are doing with children"
- "Dads are not necessary for children's development"



Possible Implications

- Gendered nature of care contributes to the **devaluation of care** across personal and professional settings.
- Exclusion of fathers from communications about ECD, as well as from policies and programs designed to support parents and children.
- Public resistance towards policies that support parents.

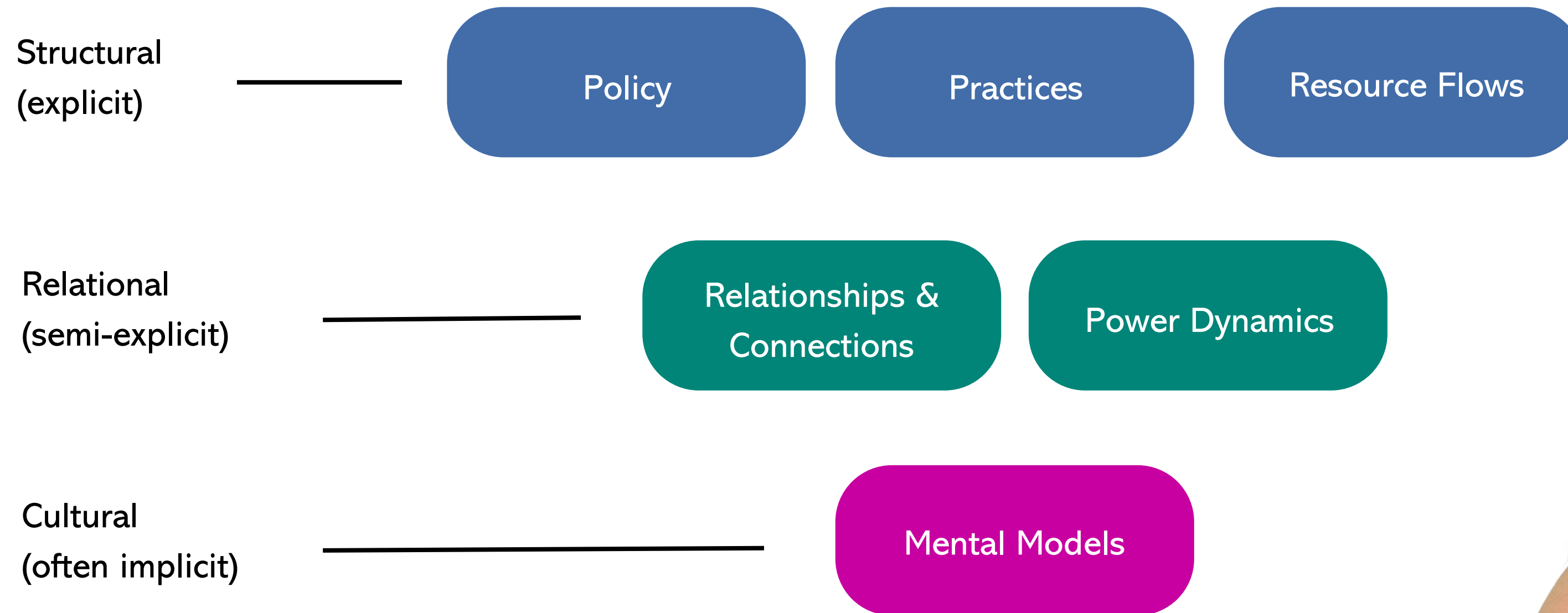
Recommendations for Change



Strategies for overcoming the impact of unhelpful mental models about parenting

What to do	Why it helps
Focus on how programs benefit children and make explicit connections between parenting and benefits to children . (L'Hôte et al, 2017).	Framing parenting as a means of achieving better outcomes for children is likely to garner support for related policies and programs.
Explain how context impacts parenting. (L'Hôte et al, 2017).	Correcting perceptions around parenting capacity by highlighting social influences can help to correct unhelpful narratives about parental deservingness and responsibility and avoid polarizing judgements (e.g., "good parents vs bad parents").
Don't use subjective judgements such as "effective" when communicating about parenting. (L'Hôte et al, 2017).	Subjective terms such as "effective" can activate unhelpful judgements such as "there are good parents and bad parents." Avoiding this language helps to circumvent this.

Where do we focus our efforts?



Adapted from Kasia et al., 2018.



Racism and inequities need to be treated with care and purpose

- Use a **strengths-based** and **community-led** process
- This involves **leadership and governance** through genuine partnership with communities, where the conception and all stages of change efforts originates from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- The **voice** of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse people from diverse backgrounds and experiences needs to be highlighted

Next Steps

- Be clear on where we have an **implementation gap** vs an **evidence gap**
- Co-Design Workshops to explore **specific recommendations** for change in Australia.
- **Rigorous testing** of framing strategies in some areas is required.
- Questions about the co-design process?
 - Email: backbone@earlyyearscatalyst.org.au



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