

Rise Up Policy Brief

2026



Using the Integrated Response Framework to Build Cross-Sector Ecosystems for Child Wellbeing and the Prevention of Child Harm

Executive summary

Around the world, governments invest billions of dollars annually in education, health, child protection, justice, housing, disability and social services. Despite this investment, too many children continue to experience preventable harm, family adversity and poor life outcomes.

Most countries already have the services needed to improve outcomes. **The challenge is rarely a lack of services, but that systems remain organised around institutions, funding streams and professional boundaries rather than around the lives of children and families.**

Children do not experience government services separately. A child with declining school attendance may also be living with family violence, poverty, housing instability, disability or social isolation. These

experiences are interconnected, yet the systems designed to respond often remain fragmented.

This brief argues that preventing child harm requires governments to move beyond multi-agency coordination towards integrated cross-sector ecosystems. It proposes the **Integrated Response Framework (IRF)**, featuring the Te Ako Manaaki Practice Model, as a practical architecture enabling governments and communities to organise existing resources more coherently around children and families.

Drawing on IRF implementation in Aotearoa New Zealand, this brief shows how governments can strengthen early intervention and reduce duplication through integrated ecosystem design rather than additional programmes – an adaptable architecture suited to diverse cultural and governance contexts.

The questions we sought to answer

- ✓ How can governments move from fragmented services to integrated ecosystems that better prevent child harm?
- ✓ What conditions enable governments, indigenous organisations, communities and other sectors to work together around shared outcomes?
- ✓ How can existing resources be organised more effectively before investing in additional programmes or services?

A public health approach to child protection

This policy brief addresses the following ISPCAN public health and system-strengthening pillars:

- Ensuring effective governance and multi-sectoral coordination



The challenge: systems built around institutions, not lives

Children do not experience services. They experience lives. A child's wellbeing is shaped by relationships, family, culture, education, housing, health, income, community, identity and opportunity. Yet public systems continue to organise responses through separate agencies, legislation, funding streams, reporting requirements and performance measures.

The consequences are familiar across many countries:

- Early warning signs are missed
- Families repeat their stories to multiple agencies
- Services duplicate effort
- Resources are used inefficiently
- Intervention often occurs after crises have emerged
- Communities become frustrated navigating complex systems.

The challenge is therefore not simply improving individual services, but rather redesigning how systems work together.

Why existing systems struggle

Traditional child protection approaches often focus on:

- coordinating services after crisis;
- improving individual programmes;
- measuring organisational outputs; and
- strengthening collaboration within government.

Instead the Integrated Response Framework focuses on:

- early identification of vulnerability;
- organising systems around children and families;
- enabling cross-sector ecosystem governance; and
- measuring shared outcomes and continuous learning.

From multi-agency to cross-sector ecosystems

The Integrated Response Framework goes beyond traditional multi-agency collaboration. Rather than coordinating government agencies alone, it provides an architecture for cross-sector ecosystems in which government, indigenous organisations, community groups, philanthropy, researchers and families contribute complementary capabilities towards shared outcomes.

Multi-agency collaboration, while important, cannot on its own overcome the complex social determinants shaping child wellbeing. Children live within ecosystems, not government systems. Effective prevention requires coordinated action across sectors, each contributing distinct capabilities that no single organisation can provide alone.

Sector	Complementary capabilities within a cross-sector ecosystem
Government	Policy, legislation, investment, accountability, scale
Indigenous organisations	Cultural leadership, trusted relationships, strengths-based practice, community legitimacy
Community organisations	Local knowledge, agility, navigation, long-term relationships
Philanthropy	Innovation, flexibility, early investment, willingness to test new approaches
Research institutions	Evidence generation, evaluation, continuous learning
Families and communities	Lived experience, resilience, priorities and local solutions

No sector replaces another. Their value lies in their complementary strengths. Within this architecture, governments play a critical stewardship role by creating the policy, governance and investment conditions that enable other sectors to contribute their complementary strengths. Rather than replacing existing services, the Framework strengthens how sectors work together around shared outcomes.

Preventing child harm depends on recognising vulnerability before crisis occurs. Across many countries, opportunities for earlier intervention already exist but remain dispersed across agencies and organisations. The Framework therefore places strong emphasis on identifying early indicators and coordinating timely responses before risk escalates.

The Integrated Response Framework

The Integrated Response Framework (IRF) is the practical mechanism through which cross-sector ecosystem governance can be operationalised. Rather than introducing another programme, it provides an architecture for organising existing policy, practice, relationships and resources into a coherent system focused on children and families.

Ecosystem readiness

Understanding existing strengths, leadership, referral pathways, service gaps and community capability before implementing change.

Systems-level action

Aligning governance, commissioning, policy settings, accountability, referral pathways and information sharing.

Relational practice

Building trusted relationships with children, families and communities while strengthening collaboration between organisations.

Learning systems

Integrating evaluation, administrative data, economic analysis, lived experience and continuous learning to improve policy and investment decisions.

Together these components create the conditions for coordinated action across government and community systems.

Traditional child protection systems ask:
‘What service does this child need?’

The Integrated Response Framework asks:
‘What conditions within this child’s ecosystem are preventing them and their family from thriving?’



Implementation experience from Aotearoa New Zealand

The Integrated Response Framework has been applied across education attendance, family harm, disability and broader community settings. Rather than creating a new standalone programme, implementation re-organises existing relationships, resources and practice around shared outcomes.

1. Assess readiness and map the ecosystem

Define the scope and map existing services, relationships, referral pathways, strengths, gaps and community capability to identify what can be better connected and what needs to be developed.

2. Establish cross-sector governance

Create a steering group with clear Terms of Reference, shared outcomes, accountability and feedback mechanisms. Its role is to provide stewardship and address system-level barriers, rather than manage individual cases.

3. Establish coordination and implementation capacity

Provide dedicated coordination to connect governance and operations, convene partners, support information flow and data, maintain relationships and ensure system issues are escalated and acted on.

4. Implement the operational model

Use neutral facilitators or case managers to bring the right people together around children and families, develop a coordinated plan, clarify responsibilities and timeframes, and monitor progress through regular cross-sector professional meetings.

5. Build in measurement and feedback

Collect individual, service and system outcomes, lived experience and relevant administrative and economic data, with feedback loops connecting frontline practice, operations and governance.

6. Evaluate and adapt

Use evidence to determine whether the ecosystem is improving outcomes, enabling earlier intervention, reducing duplication and making better use of existing resources, then use those findings to refine, scale or redirect future strategy and investment.

Implementation has demonstrated:

- Earlier identification of vulnerability
- Improved engagement with children and families
- Stronger cross-sector relationships
- Better navigation through complex systems
- Reduced duplication between agencies
- More efficient use of existing investment (see below)
- Improved access to culturally responsive support
- Greater alignment between policy and frontline practice.

Importantly, many of these improvements have been achieved through redesigning existing systems rather than creating new programmes.

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More effective use of existing investment.

Early implementation demonstrated that existing contracts could be reorganised to increase their reach rather than requiring a new programme or funding stream. In an early education application, a small proportion of existing Alternative Education funding was used to support the key coordinating roles within the model. **While the traditional contract supported approximately 25 students across a year, the integrated model enabled coordinated support to reach more than 150 young people by connecting existing education, health, social and community resources around them.** It also improved the appropriateness of referrals and helped existing services engage children and whānau they had previously struggled to reach.

Efficiency does not necessarily mean reduced demand.

Better identification, engagement and navigation can reveal previously unmet need and increase appropriate use of other services. The Framework therefore helps distinguish between fragmentation and genuine service gaps, enabling policymakers to use existing investment more effectively while identifying where additional capacity or investment is genuinely required.

Policy recommendations

1. Shift from programme-based delivery to ecosystem-based governance

Organise systems around children and families rather than around institutional boundaries.

2. Use early indicators to trigger coordinated support

Recognise educational difficulties, family violence, housing instability, disability and other vulnerability indicators as opportunities for earlier collaborative intervention.

3. Establish cross-sector ecosystem governance

Establish governance arrangements that include government agencies, indigenous organisations, community organisations, philanthropy, researchers and people with lived experience.

4. Invest in relational capability

Recognise trust, navigation, cultural capability and relationship-building as essential infrastructure rather than optional practice.

5. Build integrated learning systems

Combine individual outcomes, system outcomes, administrative data, economic evaluation and lived experience to support continuous improvement.

6. Invest in ecosystem capability and innovation

Invest not only in programmes but also in the collaboration, leadership, innovation and community capability required for ecosystems to function effectively.

Implementation considerations

Short term

- Map ecosystem strengths and gaps
- Identify priority early indicators
- Establish cross-sector governance
- Review referral pathways.

Medium term

- Develop shared outcome measures
- Align commissioning across sectors
- Strengthen indigenous and community partnerships
- Build integrated evaluation frameworks.

Long term

- Scale successful ecosystem approaches
- Embed continuous learning into policy development
- Use evidence to guide future investment and reform.

Key enablers

- Shared vision, outcomes and accountability
- Trust and relational capability
- Indigenous and community leadership
- Integrated data and evaluation
- Sustainable governance.

Why education matters

Education is one of the earliest systems able to detect changes in a child's wellbeing. Shifts in attendance, engagement, behaviour, participation or achievement often appear long before statutory intervention becomes necessary, frequently reflecting broader challenges such as family violence, poverty, disability, housing instability, mental distress or family disruption. Schools should not be expected to resolve these issues alone.

When education is connected with health, social services, community and indigenous organisations, and families, however, it becomes one of the most effective gateways for coordinated early intervention. Preventing child harm therefore requires education to be recognised as a critical partner within an integrated ecosystem, not simply another service – and one of governments' clearest opportunities to operationalise prevention through cross-sector action.



Conclusion

Children already live within integrated ecosystems. Our policies, funding arrangements and governance structures should enable systems to work in the same way.

The opportunity for policymakers is not simply to improve existing programmes, but to redesign how systems work together. The Integrated Response Framework offers one practical architecture for achieving this – bringing together cross-sector governance, relational practice, early identification and continuous learning, and enabling government, indigenous organisations, communities, philanthropy, researchers and families to contribute their complementary strengths toward shared outcomes.

Further information

- Te Ako Manaaki – a framework enabling cross sector collaboration to improve outcomes for young people and their communities: www.integratedresponse.nz and <https://teakomanaaki.com/>

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Te Ako Manaaki

An Integrated Response Framework

This policy brief was prepared to accompany the Rise Up Policy Forum session [From Fragmentation to Coherence: How Education-Centred Cross-Sector Practice Can Prevent Child Harm](#) that took place in Melbourne in 2026.

The [ISPCAN Rise Up Policy Forum](#) is a global initiative to catalyse progress in child protection through a public health and system strengthening approach. It brings together governments, researchers and practitioners in a community of practice and learning, to build on and translate into action the pledges made during the 2024 Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children.



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