



Building safe and respectful cultures in **disability services for people with disability**

Executive Summary in plain English

June 2019

It's
OK
to complain

 Disability
Services
Commissioner

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For the Disability Services Commissioner

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Photo by Kate Disher-Quill

This image was used as part of a violence and abuse prevention initiative of the Disability Services Commissioner called **the together project**.

The project brought everyone together to make wrap art. It was an opportunity to open up conversations between people with disability, families, friends, support workers, and broader community members. To talk about what makes us all feel safe, happy and respected.

It was the start of some great conversations. When we talk, ask and listen, we learn what really matters to each other.



Building safe and respectful cultures in disability services for people with disability

Executive summary in plain English

Building Safe and Respectful Cultures was a pilot project.

The aim of the project was to learn more about the culture of services for people with disability. We wanted to understand the role of culture in promoting safety and respect. We wanted to know more about what can lead to violence, abuse and neglect in disability services.

We also wanted to find some practical approaches that would increase safety and respect in services for people with disability.

Three key groups produced this research project together:

- Community researchers – people with disability
- A team of academic researchers
- Staff from the Disability Services Commissioner

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Project design

The project aimed to

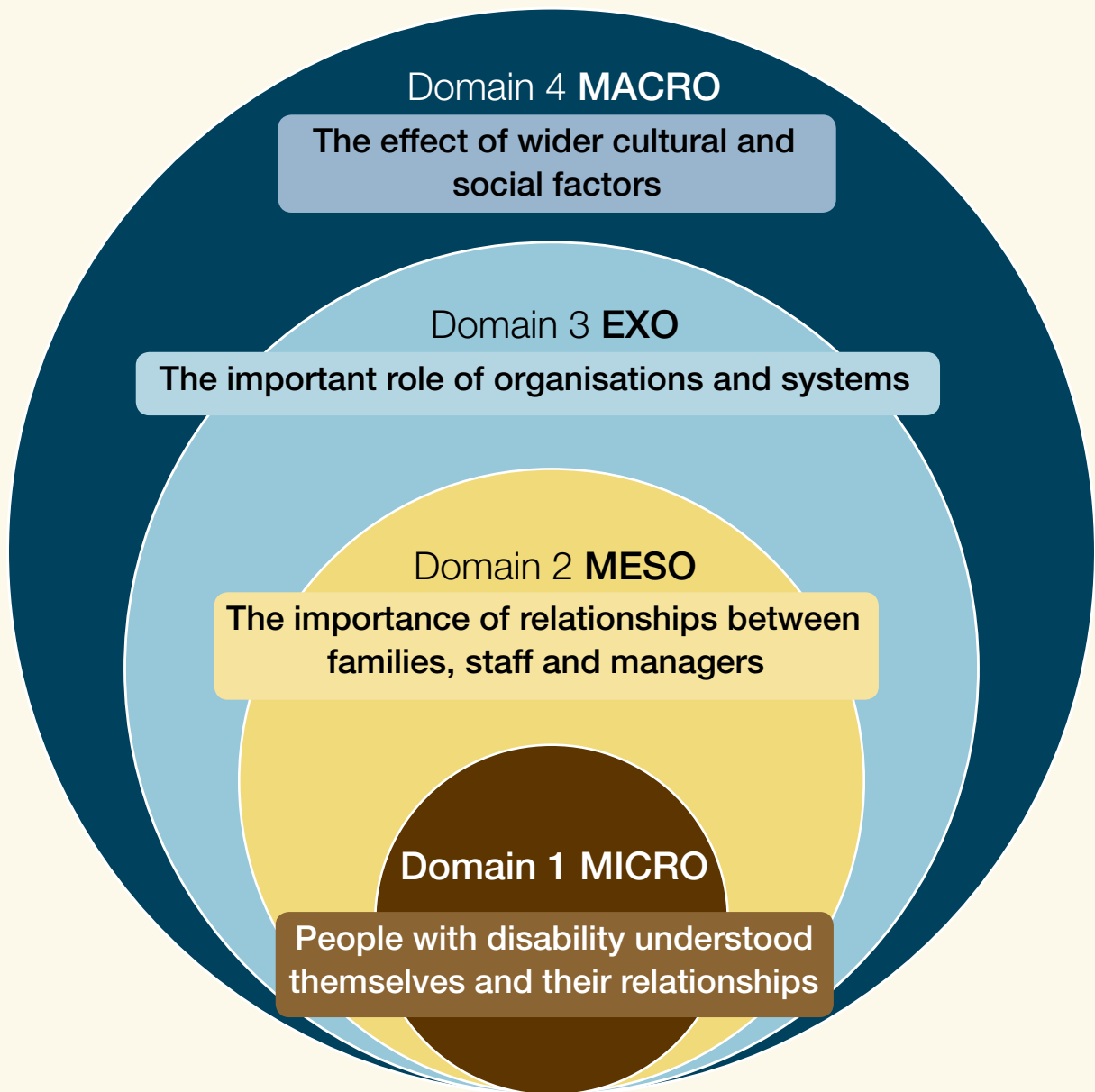
- understand the role culture has in promoting safety and wellbeing and
- look at the conditions that lead to violence, abuse and neglect in disability services.

The research team used social ecological theory as a conceptual framework.

This theory helped us make sense of the ways that:

- People with disability understood themselves and their relationships (Domain 1 - MICRO)
- The importance of relationships between families, staff and managers (Domain 2 - MESO)
- The important role of organisations and systems (Domain 3 - EXO)
- The effect of wider cultural and social factors (Domain 4 - MACRO)

We looked at how these four domains made people feel about their capacity to make change and build cultures of safety and respect.



We looked at some previous research.

This was from the University of Hull. We used the early indicators of concern to help frame the project questions and ideas. The indicators are a prevention tool that can be used to identify concerns early.

We recruited three disability service providers, over four sites, for the project

- two supported accommodation houses in suburban Melbourne (part of a large organisation)
- a service that focused on skills for younger adults with intellectual disability in suburban Melbourne
- a regional service providing individual and group support to a wide range of people, most with intellectual disability.

Research design

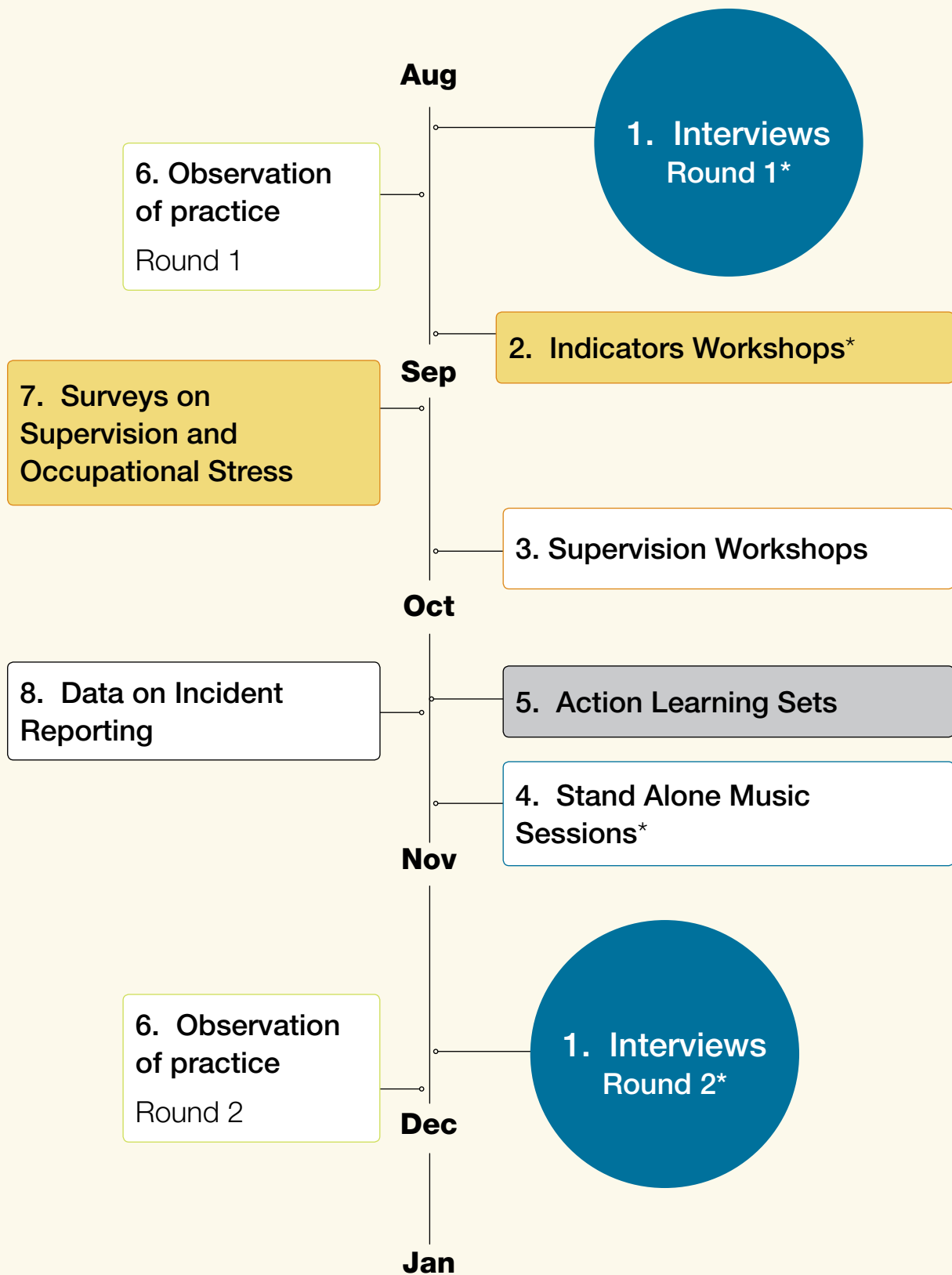
We gathered information in a range of ways.

We asked each of the disability service providers we recruited to:

1. **take part in interviews**, there were 2 rounds of interviews, with 18 participants* in each round
2. **attend a workshop about the indicators (community of practice approach)** across 3 sites with 61 participants*
3. **attend a supervision workshop** for 16 participants with supervisory responsibility
4. **attend music sessions** with 38 participants*
5. **take part in action learning sets (community of practice approach)** for managers and CEOs 4 x monthly sessions
6. **allow us to observe usual interactions in their services**, across three sites
7. **complete surveys on supervision and occupational stress**, we received 35 surveys
8. **provide data on incident reporting**

The diagram shows what we asked the disability service providers to do. It also shows when they did it.

Where there is an asterisk symbol * includes involvement of people with disability, family members and staff from services



Results

What we understand about safe and respectful cultures

It is difficult for people to respond to questions about 'safety' and 'respect.' So we asked people to tell us about what they understood about

- care and support
- safety
- choice and making decisions
- problem solving.

Care and support

People thought about what care is in two ways:

- **activities**, such as being helped to complete activities or routines
- **relationships**.

Many people with disability said that emotional care was important.

To have someone to talk to when they were feeling sad or upset. Being invited to do new activities they liked was another way that people felt cared about, because this showed that people were thinking about what they wanted. Being a good friend was also very important to several people.

Staff talked about the practical ways they provided support, activities and access to information as a core part of their role.

They talked about the importance of rapport in building a positive working relationship. They also spoke about the need to maintain boundaries around privacy and sharing information.

Family members thought that care was positive and supportive when rapport was strong.

They valued workers who used the rapport in their working relationships to help people with disability manage anxiety, distress and agitation. Some family members commented that the care that people with disability gave each other was not recognised as strongly as they thought it could be.

Safety

People with disability spoke about physical and emotional safety.

Feeling physically safe was important for the people who had experienced violence, abuse and neglect. People with disability spoke about feeling unsafe because of other people using the service. To feel physically and emotionally safe, people with disability said that it helped to have someone they knew well who they could talk to (mainly staff and family). Being able to have a break to manage stress, reduce distress or conflict, or get their energy back was important. It helped to have access to a private space, or at least one away from noisy and disruptive spaces. Not everyone felt they had this access to people or places.

Some staff focused on building a sense of safety for people with disability through their relationship, as part of their role.

They said it was important to be able to look for, and recognise, subtle signs that people with disability were feeling uncomfortable, concerned or unsafe. As well as then acting to deal with these to increase the safety for the person.

Families valued the quality of relationships between staff and their family member.

Many trusted the staff would act properly to keep their family members safe. Families also mentioned past experiences where people with disability were not safe. This included instances of violence and abuse, and situations where things had gone missing. They also talked about more complex, difficult to work through, issues in their family members' lives. Most of these involved other people also using the service.

Choice and making decisions

Most people with disability said that they were able to make choices about the activities and programs in their daily routines.

They were mostly pleased about this. Some people said they knew what to do if they had a problem with their service. These people mainly talked about asking for help from senior staff at their service. People with disability spoke about having a say about activities in the service. But not about being involved in making decisions about relationships or wider quality of life issues.

Several people said that it can be hard to speak up. This was for a range of reasons including:

- feeling shy
- because it was hard to speak up to staff when they said no
- when a trusted member of staff was not available to speak to
- because of the effects of pain and fatigue to do with their disability
- when there was conflict with other people with disability who also used the service.

Some people had negative experiences before, which affected their confidence, willingness and ability to speak up.

All staff talked about encouraging people with disability to make choices about daily activities.

This included basic daily decisions about food choices through to working together to develop programs. Some staff stressed the importance of looking for signs that people with disability were either satisfied or unhappy. As well as being proactive in working with them to solve any new issues before they became problems. In most of the services, staff supported the rights of people with disability to talk with them about their concerns. However, staff didn't always give people the tools they needed to speak up or understand the barriers people with disability face when trying to speak up.

Family members generally felt that services were open to requests to change program activities.

And that in some cases were proactive in offering options when people with disability showed they were not fully engaged. Several described an informal 'open-door' approach to providing feedback. They felt this encouraged family members and other service users to feel comfortable in speaking up. Some family members encouraged and promoted supported decision making, while others were more supportive of substitute decision making. These family members relied more on the service to take responsibility for taking care of family members.

Problem solving

People with disability, families and staff members all spoke about how important it is to be able to choose who they can approach with a problem.

Some people with disability felt it was important to speak to people they knew and trusted.

Others wanted to have access to senior staff. People with disability said that staff were available to help them solve problems, but also that it was hard to approach staff sometimes. Some people talked about how it took time to build confidence. They also said they were more comfortable speaking with staff they knew well or had known for a long time.

Some staff said that while problem solving is part of their role, their core duties were to help people with daily living activities.

Sometimes they needed to prioritise this over problem solving and people needed to wait until they were less busy. Others said that there were opportunities to build people's confidence to solve problems through their daily activities. Staff emphasised the importance of good rapport and a personal connection. But also the need for all staff to be able to communicate with all participants to reduce the impact of staff turnover and absence.

Family members thought it was important that they and the person with disability had access to managers and staff who knew them well.

When services had an 'open door' for people with disability to share their views, families felt services responded well to problems. Services had listened carefully, responded quickly, involved families and worked together to come up with options that people were happy with. They also checked in about how the new options were working out.

What improved and what reduced safety and respect for people with disability

Using the social ecological framework, we analysed the results of the research to highlight what helped, what got in the way, and what was complicated about building safe and respectful cultures.

There were factors that both helped develop safe and respectful cultures and also stopped it from happening. The most striking finding, though, is how complicated it can be.

People with disability understood themselves and their relationships

What helped

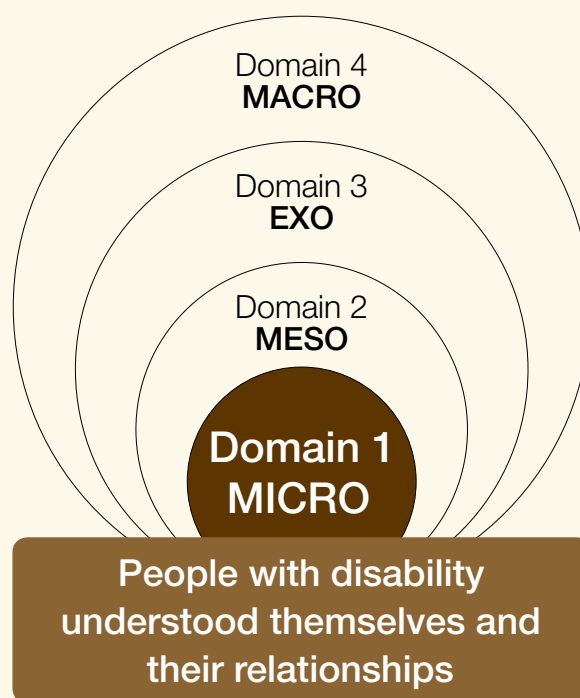
- Relationships based on trust and familiarity
- Feeling heard
- Having different ways to express views and feelings

What got in the way

- Not being taken seriously
- Feeling unable to speak up
- Peer-to-peer harm
- Disrespect
- Lower standards applied to people with disability
- Limited agency and power

What was complicated

- Speaking up is hard to do
- Problem-solving strategies might not help you become safer
- Safety strategies can be not in depth enough
- The passive role of the 'participant'
- Impact of the wider world on young people's relationships in services



The importance of relationships between families, staff and managers

What helped

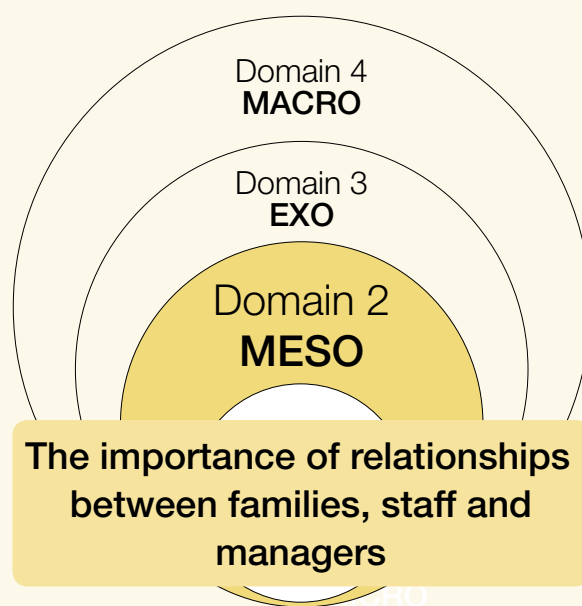
- Relationships that recognise positive qualities and attributes in others
- Using a range of ways to support people in difficult times and with sensitive issues

What got in the way

- Impact of challenging behaviour and interpersonal conflict
- Staff misuse of power
- Staff not seeing relationship support as a priority
- Families being grateful and reluctant to 'make a fuss'

What was complicated

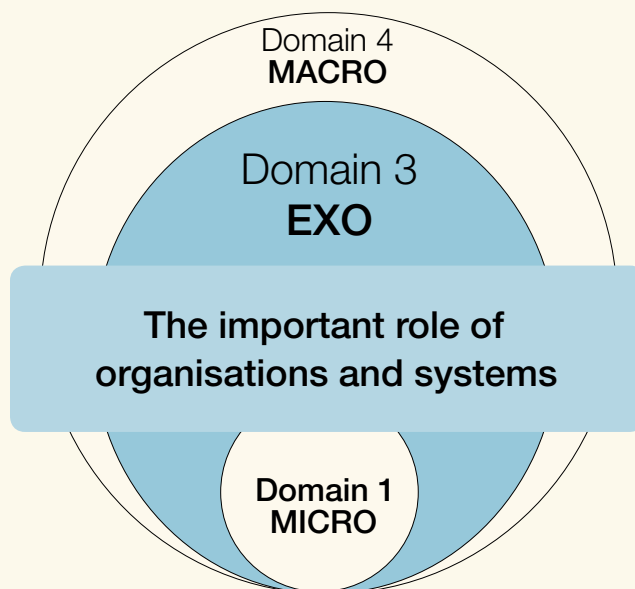
- The little things are the big things
- Balancing competing needs and preferences
- Difficult for some staff and families to see the perspectives of people with disability
- Stress and a sense that other people don't understand
- Conflicts and tensions between the rights of people with disability and the rights of staff
- Staff not feeling secure and safe in their role



The important role of organisations and systems

What helped

- Well-organised environments
- Policies, procedures and guidelines developed for the service
- Practical strategies in services that bring policies to life for people with disability
- Trained and supported staff
- Education and opportunities to practice safety-making for people with disability



What got in the way

- Impact of resource and time constraints on capacity to support people with disability and staff
- Resources getting in the way of effective responses to problems
- Staff who are under-skilled or not able to provide preventive support
- Lack of support, supervision, career planning for staff and managers

What was complicated

- Different knowledge about policies, procedures and implementation
- Role clarity and boundary setting for staff
- Tension between rights of people with disability and the rights of staff
- Difficult balance between compliance, risk and rights

The effect of wider cultural and social factors

What helped

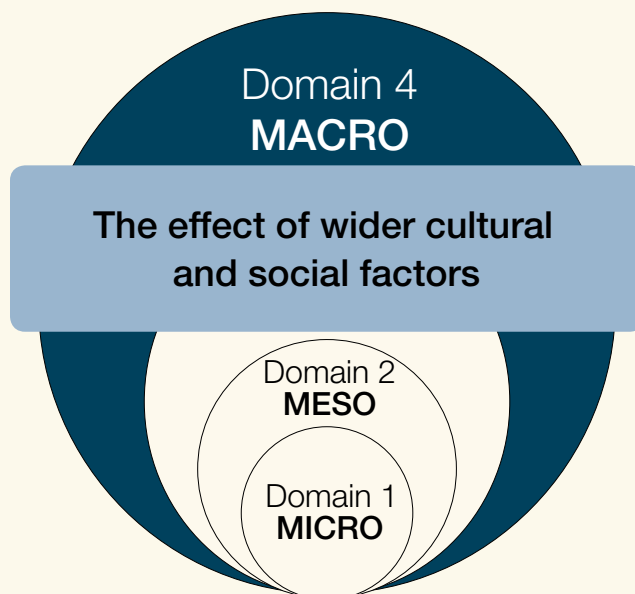
- Increasing knowledge of human rights
- Pride in role, strong values base

What got in the way

- Activating rights
- Risk of support relationships breaking
- NDIS controlled practice and structure

What was complicated

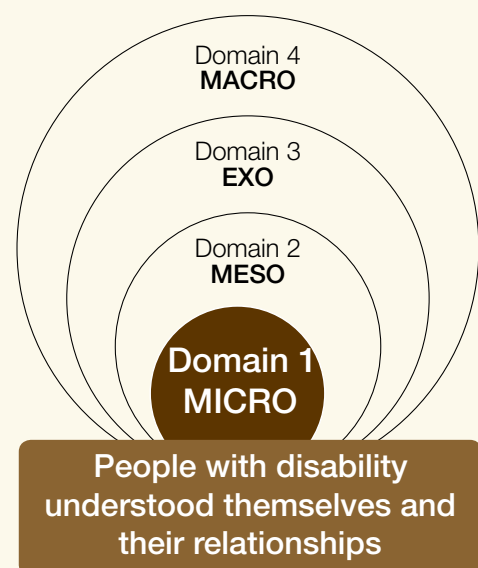
- Many – outside of this research (e.g. poverty, exclusion, social isolation, discrimination, community attitudes)



What can build cultures of safety and respect

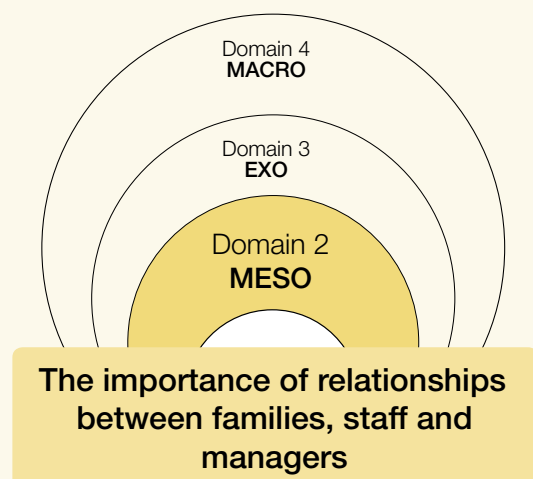
People with disability understood themselves and their relationships

- Develop and tailor strategies that support people with disability to make and sustain better relationships.
- Provide opportunities and different ways for people with disability to have a say.
- Develop practical education and strategies to help people see results from practising having a say, speaking up and using their rights.



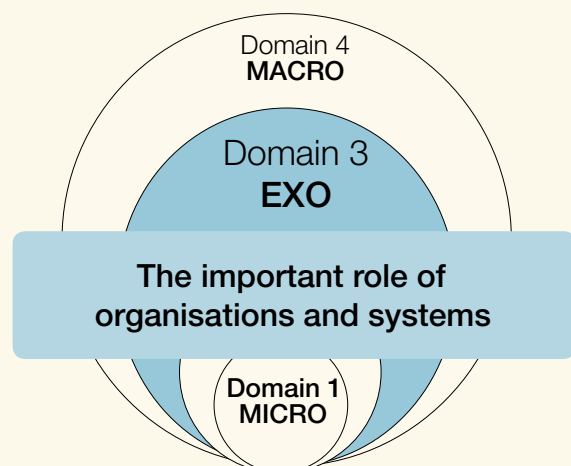
The importance of relationships between families, staff and managers

- Work to develop positive and equal relationships where each person in the relationship can have influence in positive ways. This is the core task across the sector.
- Build staff skills to recognise and respond to the safety strategies that people with disability use when they feel worried or unsafe. This builds capacity and independence in people with disability and gives them a sense of safety in the services they use.
- Prioritise doing something about issues people raise with staff and management. Increasing opportunities for feedback and reporting back on what has been done, will make people with disability and their families more confident about raising issues and ideas.
- Blurring boundaries can cause confusion and introduce problems. Explaining and working through roles may help remove confusion about boundaries that cause tension around safety and respect.
- Look for opportunities for people with disabilities, staff, families, managers and the wider community to train and work together.



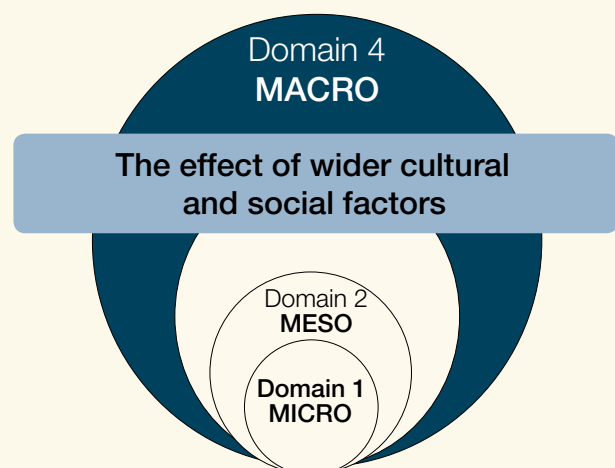
The important role of organisations and systems

- Consult the people involved in any change before it happens. Consider the possible impact of the change on the lives and relationships of people with disability, staff and families.
- Increase the use of accessible information. Make sure that all key information about safety and respect is available to people in alternative formats.
- Make time available within rosters and staffing to build and maintain relationships.
- Provide staff with supervision that builds a supportive and accountable relationship.
- Offer staff training that is regular, evidence based and supports the issues they face in their daily work.
- Review complaints processes.
- Review how much demands from the organisation, administration and domestic duties, keep staff away from interacting with people with disability.
- Build on positive practice at the senior manager level across organisations. This can establish a collaborative community of practice focused on safe and respectful cultures.
- Work with other organisations to make progress on ‘wicked’ problems. The issue of violence, abuse and neglect of people with a disability is considered a ‘wicked’ problem. It refers to an idea or problem that cannot be fixed easily, and where there is no single solution to the problem.



The effect of wider cultural and social factors

- Relationships need to be prioritised in planning and funding mechanisms.
- More streamlined and less confusing NDIS planning and funding.
- The NDIS needs a policy and funding framework for prevention work.
- Access to independent advocacy for people with disability and families is needed, especially for people who don't have family or other supporters involved.



Four common themes across the research

1. People at all levels of the research felt it was very difficult to make change

At all levels, many people felt they had little ability to change their situation or to make changes to improve the lives of people with disability. Most of the people involved in this research were alert and wary. Almost everyone was stressed and felt that other people didn't understand what it was like to be in their situation.

Participants valued the community of practice approach, where people with disability, staff and family members attended the workshops together. Feedback showed that the activities made people feel equal and part of a community. They helped participants from all of the groups to hear each other's points of view.

2. Multiple sets of rights need to be brought into view

We need to raise expectations around choice, decision making, safety and relationships for people with disability.

A lack of ability to act independently affects a person's level of choice. So does not being able to see all the possible options. For the NDIS to change the lives of people with disability they need to have:

- meaningful choices
- time
- advocacy
- support for decision making.

This allows people to make decisions about important matters in their lives, including where and how they spend their time.

Ways to make relationships a priority for people with disability include:

- supporting them to build and sustain friendships with other people with disability
- explaining working relationships between people using services and people providing them
- providing clear frameworks for relationship-driven support within services.

For people to feel and be safe in the services they use, what they want and their opinions need to be important. In no other community is it considered ok to continue to spend time with people you fear or who have been violent, abused you and neglected you.

Most of the time, people with disability and workers described relationships based on mutual regard and trust. But at some important times, the rights of one or both groups to safety, decision making, taking part and privacy were affected.

In a few difficult cases, the rights of both groups were affected at the same time. These were about the right to be safe, the right to be supported and the right to be treated with respect. These examples highlighted the difficulties that disability service providers have in responding to the rights of people with disability in complex situations. Situations where people being violent, victims and witnesses have different positions and responsibilities in the organisation.

3. Less resources and pressure to deliver efficient services make it harder to create safe and respectful cultures

All the services taking part in the study said that they were under pressure to reduce resources and increase efficiency. They welcomed some of the changes, such as more opportunities for individual support. But limited time and resources that changed the way they worked made it harder for staff and managers to create safe and respectful cultures.

Demands on the resources of services working under the NDIS meant staff were less available for people with disability, and managers had less time to supervise. At a personal level, people with disability felt that staff and managers were less ready to listen. Families also felt it was more difficult to find people they could talk to and they had less confidence to bring up issues.

It wasn't possible to solve many of these issues and people with disability, individual workers, families, and managers were all trying to ease the pressures as best they could.

4. Three approaches stood out as ways to build safe and respectful cultures

Participants strongly favoured support that focussed on relationships. Across all groups, they wanted more relationship focused support and more attention on building positive practice and raising expectations.

Three approaches stood out as ways to prevent violence and abuse before it starts by building safe and respectful cultures:

- working in ways that prioritise relationships as the most important part of the work
- including a prevention approach in every day support with people with disability
- reflective practice and supervision for staff.

Conclusion

The project wanted to learn more about the culture of services for people with disability. It showed the complex cultures of three different disability services. It looked at some of the features of those cultures that facilitated feelings of mutual respect and safety, and what was complicated.

As a pilot project it was modest in scope. It identified some practical approaches and strategies that might be useful now and relevant for future development. We hope it will lead to wider research in this area as it highlights the importance of culture in preventing violence, abuse and neglect of people with disability.

Disability Services Commissioner is an independent voice promoting rights and resolving complaints about disability services.

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