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Respecting Dignity and Reducing Harm

The Need for a Tiered Response to Elder Abuse

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About Us

Centre for Better Relationships

The Centre for Better Relationships is the research and policy arm of Better Place Australia. We work within complex social, economic, and political systems that shape the lives of our clients. Our aim is to generate knowledge that contributes to lasting and positive change for our clients and child and family services sector.

Better Place Australia

Better Place Australia provides a supportive place for individuals, couples, families and children. We have a clear vision and purpose of empowering Australians towards resilience, well-being, and fulfilling futures.

Better Place Australia's Respecting Elders Service is a Victorian Government funded service that supports older people from experiencing any form of family conflict or elder abuse. We provide the only Victorian Specialist Family Violence service exclusively working with older people, supporting over 2,000 clients since 2018. Better Place Australia auspice an Elder Abuse Prevention Network and participates on State Level Round Tables and various family violence networks across Victoria.

Acknowledgement of Country

We would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we work, and recognise their continuing connection to Country, waters and community. We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to Elders both past and present, and to their children and young people who are the future caretakers of this great land.

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Overview

Elder abuse is a complex social and public health issue that requires more than crisis intervention. It needs prevention, early support, and proportionate protection. Effective frameworks must balance older people's autonomy with proportionate safeguards that minimise harm, while recognising the family relationships that shape both risk and resilience. Many older people delay seeking help due to fears of legal consequences, family breakdown, or increased isolation, emphasising the need for responses that prioritise empowerment and choice. Drawing on human rights principles, this paper examines how evidence-based and practice-informed frameworks can strengthen responses to elder abuse, proposing a tiered response for both prevention and intervention. Policy should build on existing approaches by placing greater emphasis on coordinated and sustainable strategies that strengthen prevention, respect autonomy, and provide proportionate pathways to safety and support.

Recent national efforts recognise the **urgent need for coordinated action** to address elder abuse.¹ As policy and service sectors respond to these priorities, there is an opportunity to deepen our understanding of elder abuse across the spectrum from prevention to protection.

Through delivering elder abuse services, Better Place Australia (BPA) has observed that **older people often face complex and unique circumstances when experiencing abuse**, particularly within family settings. Frequently, the person using harm is an adult child who lives with the older person. They may be experiencing unemployment, substance dependence or mental health issues. As a result, many older people may feel responsible for the wellbeing of their family member. These dynamics present unique challenges for supporting older people experiencing abuse.

Older people may hesitate to seek help due to shame, embarrassment, or fear of negative consequences for the person using harm. The desire to preserve relationships, even in the context of harm, can make legal pathways feel too extreme or unhelpful. In some cases, older people may not report their experiences or



breaches of intervention orders due to uncertainty of what may happen if the person using violence also provides their day-to-day care or lives with them. The older person may be concerned about other consequences of a protection order such as losing access to care or their family member becoming homeless if removed from the shared home.

These themes have been reflected in research conducted by the Centre for Better Relationships, the research and advocacy arm of BPA.² The research found that **older people typically prefer social support services**, especially those that offer advice, guidance, and mediation, rather than punitive or legal action against a family member. Many may hesitate to contact formal support services out of fear it will “*make things worse*”, disrupt the family peace, or lead to unwanted legal consequences. These findings reinforce the importance of a person-centred and preventative approach that is tailored to the needs and preferences of older people.

Older people have the right to autonomy, self-determination, and **dignity of risk**, that is, the right to make informed choices even where those decisions involve some risk. These rights have been recognised within federal and state-level policies.³⁻⁵ However, a key challenge in recognising these rights in elder abuse responses is the need to carefully balance these rights with ensuring **proportionate protective responses** when harm occurs. Current policy and service settings often struggle to achieve this balance, leaving older people with responses that can feel either too limited or punitive. A rights-based approach offers a way forward by prioritising older people’s **will and preferences** while providing proportionate safeguards. Achieving this in practice requires systemic reform and coordinated action across prevention, early intervention, and protection. Upholding older people’s rights requires policy and service systems to **provide multiple pathways** to safety and support that achieve a careful balance between autonomy and safety.

To be effective, these reforms must also be supported by practical models that translate rights-based principles into policy and service design, ensuring responses are proportionate to risk, **reflective of older people’s preferences, and responsive to family dynamics**.



Below, **we outline two models that could strengthen policy responses and service delivery**, illustrating how these principles can be applied in practice. The first is Schiamberg and Gan's (1999)⁶ Applied Ecological Bi-Focal Intergenerational Model, which identifies the risk factors of elder abuse. The second is an Elder Abuse Tiered Response System Model, which was designed by Better Place Australia to describe how responses to elder abuse can be tailored across levels of complexity. Together, these models provide a foundation for designing coordinated, proportionate, and person-centred responses that align with the preferences of older people. This approach would support the older person's decision making, preserve their dignity, and avoid preventable legal escalation.

Framework for Understanding Elder Abuse Risk

The **Applied Ecological Bi-Focal Intergenerational Model** provides a theoretical framework for understanding the complex intergenerational relationship between an older person and an adult child. **This framework helps to identify both risk and protective factors** across four levels of environmental systems (see Figure 1). It takes a bi-focal approach addressing both the older person and the person using harm within their shared contexts.

The four levels of the model include:

- **Individual:** characteristics related to both the older person and person using harm. These factors may increase an older person's vulnerability and risk of becoming a victim. For the person using harm, these factors may not directly lead to perpetration but are important to consider when identifying response strategies.
- **Relationship:** the dynamics between the older person and the person using harm including shared factors, such as cohabitation, that may heighten risk within the familial or caregiving relationship.
- **Community:** the older person's or person using harm's relationships or connections with other people within the community including other family and support systems, which can influence isolation, support availability, and help-seeking patterns.



- **Society:** the broader cultural, policy, economic, and social contexts that shape both risk and response to elder abuse across communities and systems.

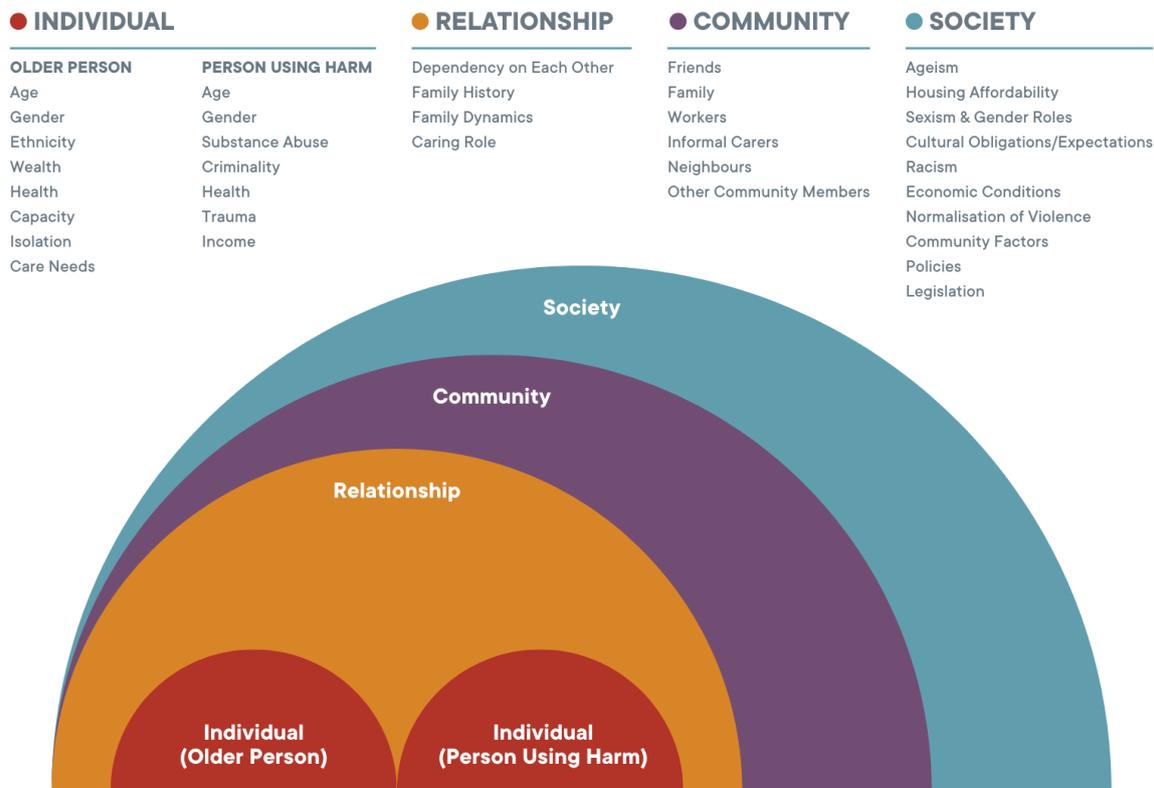


Figure 1: Bi-focal ecological framework identifying potential risks and protective factors for elder abuse adapted from Gillbard & Leggatt-Cook (2022)⁷

These systems are interconnected meaning that **changes at one level can influence others**. In intergenerational caregiving, elder abuse is rarely the result of a single event or cause. Instead, it develops over time from a dynamic interaction of personal, familial, social, and cultural factors.

This model keeps both the older person and the person using harm in simultaneous focus, examining how these environmental levels interact. Declining health, unemployment, housing insecurity, or shifting family roles can interact with relationship history and the demands of caregiving to increase risk. At the same time, positive changes to these factors can also act as protective influences by reducing the likelihood of harm. Focusing solely on the older person, or solely on the person using harm, risks overlooking these interconnected drivers of abuse. The



model highlights that effective prevention and intervention requires multiple, coordinated strategies that address all four levels of the environment to reduce risk and support safety.

The model is useful in conducting risk assessments and provides systemic understanding of elder abuse. It has already informed the work of BPA's specialist family violence service, and the Queensland Elder Abuse Prevention Unit.⁷ By examining the broader contexts surrounding the relationship between the older person and person using harm, the model can help to identify who is at risk of experiencing or perpetrating elder abuse and opportunities for early intervention. It also **enables services to better tailor responses and anticipate potential risk pathways**, strengthening both prevention and support strategies.

Framework for a Tiered Response to Elder Abuse

The **Elder Abuse Tiered Response System Model**, developed by Better Place Australia, proposes a stepped care approach to the elder abuse system (Figure 2). This model is designed to **provide the least intrusive and most supportive responses first, escalating only when necessary**. This approach aligns with BPA's commitment to empowering older people while minimising harm, ensuring that the right level of support is provided at the right time.

The tiers of the model include:

- **Community awareness:** These are preventative strategies that increase the community's awareness of elder abuse, such as through broad education campaigns, information resources, and efforts to build sector capacity to prevent elder abuse before it occurs.
- **Individual support:** Early support strategies that strengthen the older person's safety, confidence, and independence through early intervention, service access, and risk awareness.
- **Family Focus:** Support strategies that build healthier family dynamics by promoting safe support for both the older person and person using harm. It



focuses on empowering older people and their families through capacity building and improving safe communication.

- **Civil resolution and criminal proceedings:** Formal protections when abusive behaviours escalate. They include legal safeguards, tribunals, and court interventions to ensure safety, accountability, and justice.

How the system of elder abuse engagement & response relates to an older person's perception of risk

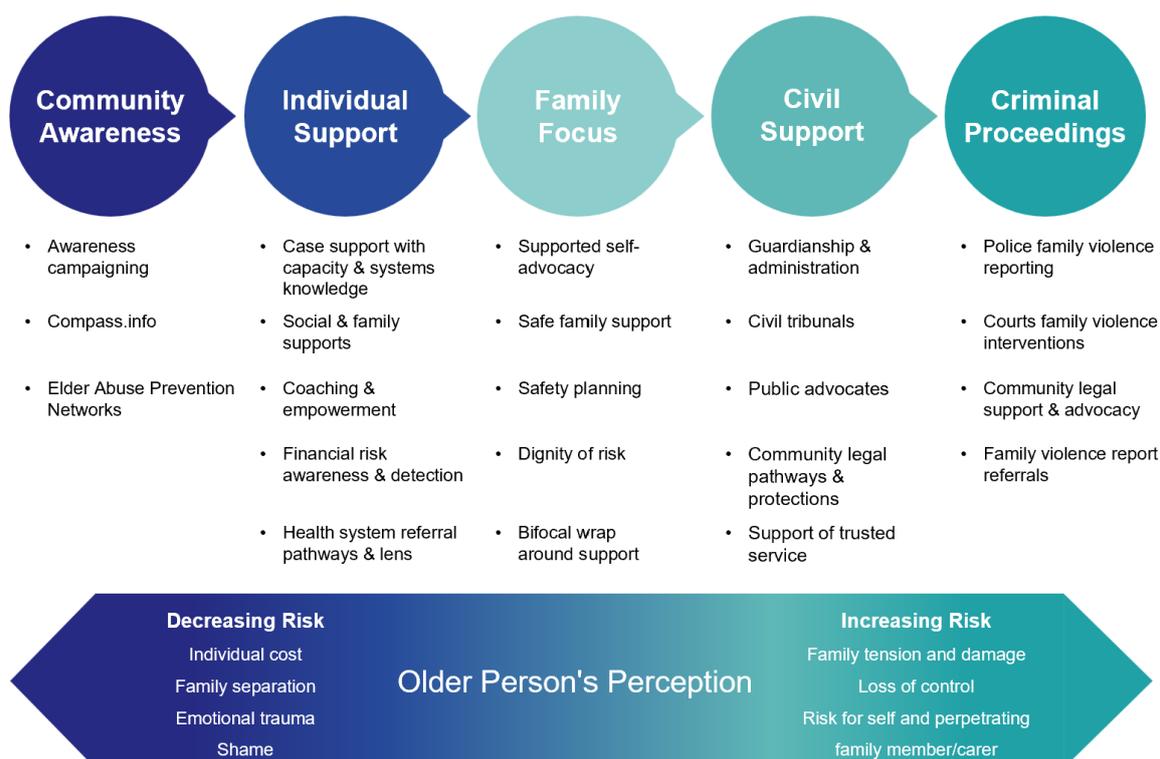


Figure 2: An Overview of the Elder Abuse Tiered Response System Model

Importantly, older people may **access supports across several tiers simultaneously**. For example, even when escalation to civil or criminal proceedings is required, ongoing individual and family-focused supports remain critical to ensuring safety, autonomy and empowerment.

The lower section of the model highlights the critical balance in elder abuse responses: **early intervention reduces the risk of individual costs and emotional trauma**, while legal escalation can increase risk of family conflict, reduce the older person's autonomy, and heighten perceived risk.



“Early intervention in elder abuse is largely restricted to older people considering legalities and their future planning (e.g., Powers of Attorney). This is entirely inadequate. We need to re-think how we can access older people and identify when elder abuse may be emerging and what we can offer such as mediation or family counselling. Otherwise, this window of opportunity is lost, and down the track, risk is too serious to offer these interventions.”

— BPA Elder Abuse Practitioner

By embedding early intervention within the elder abuse response system, **the model reduces reliance on legal pathways and helps preserve relationships** where possible and safe. Research conducted by Centre for Better Relationships confirms that most older people prefer social support services, especially those that offer advice, guidance, and mediation, rather than punitive or legal action against a family member.² The following participant quote highlights that many older people want to be empowered to make their own decisions when responding to elder abuse:

‘[I would want] Help to make up my own mind what to do, help to understand the consequences of what I could do, and help to make any changes I considered necessary.’

This model emphasises awareness, capacity building, and social work-led interventions, reducing the burden on older people to navigate complex systems alone. This is particularly significant given BPA’s unique role as the only prescribed Victorian service authorised to share information to reduce risk, ensuring older people receive coordinated support rather than fragmented, reactive responses.

In doing so, the Elder Abuse Tiered Response System Model demonstrates how **a stepped care approach ensures that the level of intervention is proportionate to the level of risk**, creating a more accessible, compassionate, and effective system for preventing and responding to elder abuse. This system recognises the importance of empowering older people, preserving relationships where safe and appropriate, and escalating intervention only as risk increases.



Understanding and Responding to Elder Abuse

Ultimately, the two models are complementary. While the Ecological Model helps understand the complex contexts in which abuse occurs, the Tiered Response System Model translates this understanding into service design and practical interventions.

Together, they offer **a coordinated response across levels of risk, from awareness and education to crisis support**. The dual model approach may help address concerns about service fragmentation and missed opportunities to integrate prevention, early intervention, and systemic reform.

‘Services for older people are fragmented, and it is hard to know where to go.’

Aligning service delivery with a structured theoretical framework ensures more consistent, coordinated, and effective responses. This approach would improve outcomes across all levels of prevention and response, reducing distress and enabling timely access to early interventions.

“A huge barrier is that professionals through to family and friends don’t recognise the red flags for elder abuse. How can you achieve early intervention, when there is such a lack of education and invisibility of the problem?”

— BPA Elder Abuse Practitioner

Policy Recommendations

Improving Australia’s long-term response to elder abuse requires **a shift towards approaches that reflect the relational and structural complexity of the issue**. The following opportunities could strengthen policy frameworks, service design, and funding decisions:

- **Systemic Reform:** Adopt a structured, multi-level framework to guide how systems understand and respond to elder abuse – recognising that elder



abuse prevention requires systemic shifts, not just increased service provision.

- **Relational Approaches:** Policy and services should acknowledge the intergenerational and relational dynamics of abuse including the complex backgrounds of those using harm and design bifocal supports that address the needs of both older people and their families.
- **Early Intervention:** Invest in person-centred early intervention approaches that provide accessible supports for older people while also offering constructive pathways for family members.
- **Research and Evidence:** Strengthen research through an ecological lens, ensuring future research and policy tackle both individual vulnerabilities and systemic enablers of abuse such as ageism, financial stress, and housing insecurity.

These priorities would help ensure Australia’s elder abuse response is comprehensive, rights-based, and consistent with the lived experiences and preferences of older people.

“The elder abuse sector doesn’t receive the same level of attention in terms of research or funding as other areas of family violence. It hasn’t had the high-profile murders that garnish community and political will. It breaks my heart because as frontline workers we see the horrific abuse that older people experience from those that are meant to love them.”

— BPA Elder Abuse Practitioner

Conclusion

Elder abuse is a complex, multi-faceted issue that requires a coordinated, person-centred response integrating prevention, early intervention, and protection. By incorporating theoretical frameworks into policy, responses can better reflect the complexity of elder abuse, helping to create a system that supports family relationships, upholds the autonomy of older people, and intervenes effectively when



harm occurs. To achieve this, a tiered response is needed, providing pathways that are proportionate to different levels of risk and responsive to older people's preferences. Establishing these foundational structures will enable Australia to move away from fragmented and reactive services toward a cohesive, empowering framework. In doing so, policy and service systems can ensure older people receive the right support at the right time, tailored to their unique needs and circumstances, while also addressing the broader social and structural factors that drive risk.

Further reading

This discussion paper was developed from Better Place Australia's response to the consultation draft on the *National Plan to End the Abuse and Mistreatment of Older People 2024–2034*. [Click here](#) to read the full submission.

[Click here](#) to read the Centre for Better Relationships' research exploring older Victorian's preferences for elder abuse services.



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