



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SYDNEY**

**Research Centre for Children and Families**

# **The Fostering Lifelong Connections Linkage Project**

**Framework for Change**

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## BACKGROUND

### The case for change

Australia's history has shaped a unique path to permanency that includes an emphasis on sustained connections with birth relatives (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). The legacy of the Stolen Generations, Forced Adoptions, and the Forgotten Australians (i.e., child migrants) denied people the opportunity to know the part of themselves that came from their birth families with painful, enduring and wide-ranging consequences (Kenny, Higgins, Soloff, & Sweid, 2012). Today, even when reunification is not an option, children's right to remain connected to birth family is upheld in an approach consistent with the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which endorses "the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests" (United Nations, 1989). In Australia, this is usually achieved through direct or face-to-face contact.

Despite the widespread practice of contact visits, there is limited evidence to guide practice on what helps make contact a safe and positive experience for children, what gets in the way of this, and how to overcome the obstacles (Collings, Neil & Wright, 2018). This is a critical knowledge gap because children in out-of-home care have invariably experienced trauma—either directly attributable to the abuse and neglect that led to them enter care or through separation from primary attachment figure, or both.

In Australia, intergenerational trauma predominantly affects Indigenous communities. Intergenerational trauma has directly and indirectly affected descendants of the Stolen Generations by disrupting familial networks and causing profound despair, hopelessness and grief (Atkinson, 2002). Compounding effects of intergenerational trauma take the form of entrenched social problems such as lateral violence, substance misuse, mental illness, and homelessness. These factors continue to be reflected in the disproportionate removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from families (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). **Aboriginal children in care, especially those not placed with kin, will rely on contact to sustain a robust sense of their cultural identity.**

In NSW, the Children's Courts decide what contact arrangements should be made as part of final orders. For those children who are adopted from care, contact plans are approved as part of an adoption order by the NSW Supreme Court. Agencies are then responsible for implementing the Court ordered contact plans, and for their annual review. Contact guidelines developed for the NSW Children's Courts encourage magistrates to include contact in care plans, rather than make specific orders in the interests of flexibility and children's changing needs (Marien, 2011). The challenge for agencies is to create plans that are dynamic and collaborative rather than procedural or combative. This involves embedding relationship-building or repair into the fabric of contact between carers and birth family and move children and families away from the adversarial processes that preceded it.

Children can feel a complex mix of emotions about seeing parents and other family members (Boyle, 2017). Confusion and distress may be communicated through behaviour that are challenging for the adults in their lives. This can compromise the ability of carers, parents and caseworkers to support a sense of belonging, identity and safety for children. Children are most likely to benefit from ongoing connections when carers have an open attitude toward contact and birth relatives accept the placement. This requires a relationship-building process that involves negotiating boundaries, managing feelings, developing open communication and having empathy and respect for each other (Neil, Cossar, Jones, Lorgelly & Young, 2011). In NSW, increased emphasis on guardianship and open adoption over long-term foster care creates an expectation for families to assume responsibility for contact visits without agency involvement. However, family members may lack the skills to (re)build relationships and caseworkers may feel out of their depth to help families overcome barriers and become allies united by their love and concern for the child.

Caseworkers in the out-of-home care sector need a clear set of relationship-building practices to guide their work with children and families that promote children's best interests. In consultation with the NSW out-of-home care sector, the NSW Government developed a set of *Common Principles for Contact* which emphasise the need for clarity of purpose, planning, respect and trust, and support for children, families and workers (NSW FACS, n.d.). To date, these have not

been formally implemented or evaluated and no mandatory training exists for professionals working in this field. There is an urgent need to develop evidence-informed practices for contact and enhance the capacity of the out-of-home-care sector to respond to the support needs of children and families in New South Wales and Australia, more broadly. This project marks a step in this direction by co-developing practice-based evidence of strategies that promote positive relationships between children and their birth and carer families with the NSW out-of-home care sector.

## THE PRINCIPLES

This project is underpinned by three interrelated principles.

### 1. Trauma awareness

Trauma results from ‘an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being’ (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 7). Exposure to trauma in childhood is particularly damaging as it interferes with critical developmental processes and causes profound and enduring effects over the life course (Szilagyi, 2018). These include impaired cognition, memory, arousal and attention which have flow on effects on social skills, identity formation and relationships (Tucci & Mitchell, 2015).

Trauma is a core experience for children in out-of-home-care so it is essential that trauma-informed practice is central to the way professionals and organisations interact with children and families. Trauma-informed practices are holistic approaches that seek to rebuild psychological and physical safety, control and empowerment in the lives of individual survivors, their helpers and community (Blignault et al., 2014). Trauma can be carried through successive generations when unacknowledged or untreated. Atkinson (2002) explains that unresolved trauma leads survivors to “adapt their behaviours and beliefs to compensate for their traumatisation” (p 86). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the chronic effects of colonisation, discrimination and institutionalised racism on family safety result in intergenerational trauma. An ecological framework that views children within their family and community context and takes account of environmental factors rather than individual behaviours alone is necessary to address intergenerational trauma (Atkinson, 2013). Services and interventions that are not trauma-sensitive can unintentionally retraumatise children and adults (Wall, Higgins & Hunter, 2016).

### 2. Cultural safety and respect

People need to feel safe in order to heal from trauma and Aboriginal peoples need to feel culturally safe to heal from intergenerational trauma. Cultural safety is “the identification a person makes with factors that are derived from the culture, belief systems or worldviews that allow them to feel safe while being with those whom they have gone to for help” (Atkinson, 2002, p 193). Child protection and out-of-home-care agencies cannot create safe environments without seeking to put right past wrongs and demonstrating respect for the wisdom of Aboriginal ways of knowing and being. Aboriginal customary practices offer a template for preserving strong family bonds and a sense of belonging for all children who have been separated from family by statutory child removal. Australian Aboriginal nations have sustained the longest enduring culture on earth through a sophisticated system of kinship structures and obligations which are passed down through story, ritual and lore (Riley, Howard-Wagner, & Mooney, 2015). This project presents an opportunity for intentional and authentic dialogue between out-of-home-care agencies and the holders of Aboriginal kinship knowledge based on openness and respect for the cultural wisdom of traditional custodians of the land.

### 3. Reflective practice

Practices are defined as discreet, concrete, observable techniques and strategies that a worker can implement with the parent or carer with the intention of achieving a specific goal. Praxis describes the integration of theory and practice and is used in human services to explain actions that are informed by critical reflection (Freire, 1970). Caseworkers are expected to have the skills to reflect on their actions, and the values and theories that underpin them, as part of

continuous learning. This is particularly important in child protection and out-of-home-care, where caseworkers are confronted with the manifest consequences of their own and others' decisions on children and families. They work with society's most complex and vulnerable families and the stakes - children's wellbeing and safety - could not be higher.

This context, however, creates inevitable tensions, such as how to balance the urgency of a child's immediate needs for safety and stability with the need to resolve challenging interpersonal dynamics between family members and with carers, and to comply with regulatory and procedural demands. This project combines sound theory and reliable evidence with knowledge gained through reciprocal exchange to test small-scale changes. Critical reflection throughout the project facilitates behaviour change among participants and creates the conditions for these to scale up to a broader community of practice across NSW.

## TERMINOLOGY

The project aims to draw attention to the power of language to both unite and divide and to encourage reflection about the acceptability of labels, for whom and under what circumstances. This is considered key to building a community of respectful and collaborative practice. Two controversial terms are offered for immediate consideration.

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### 'Contact'

In Australia and elsewhere, 'contact' is the term used to describe communication between children in out-of-home-care and family members, which includes face-to-face meetings, phone calls, social media and letters (Kiraly & Humphries, 2009). The right to contact is addressed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989, Article 9.3) and arrangements about an individual child are negotiated during the court process. The term 'contact' is used in the legal setting and casts a formal air over these fragile relationships. In Australia, there is growing recognition of the negative connotations of the term 'contact'. It denotes that children's family relationships are procedural, not relational, and this jeopardises their engagement with caseworkers and carers. The term 'family time' is now widely used to reflect the fundamental importance of high-quality relationships between children and their families. It is recommended that the project refer to contact as family time.

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### 'Birth' parents

Parents with children in permanent care retain a strong sense of their parent identity. Terms such as 'birth' or 'biological' are powerful reminders of their diminished status and loss. The creation of a new legal parent through adoption bestows legitimacy on this new entity by distinguishing it from the original parent-child relationship. Terms like 'adoptive parent' or 'foster parent' hold symbolic power and can undermine the ability of important adults in a child's life to form relationships. Avoiding them can help create a space for openness, respect and trust to flourish. Agreement is sought to refrain from using the prefix 'birth' when referring to children's family of origin wherever possible.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

Action Research refers to a broad family of participatory approaches used to build evidence in areas that lack an empirical research base, find practical solutions to areas of urgent concern to people and understand complex situations (Hughes, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). It offers a structured approach to developing practice innovations through experimentation, reflection and learning. Action research promotes collaboration, enabling authentic involvement of multiple diverse stakeholders through a community of practice that develops among the stakeholders and researchers (Chouinard & Milley, 2016; McCormack & Dewing, 2012). The project embraces a decolonised research agenda which relies on genuine participation, collaboration and partnership with Aboriginal communities (AIATSIS, 2011).

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The overarching research question for this project is:

**How can caseworkers support children’s permanent families and birth families to develop and sustain positive relationships?**

The research will be conducted using an iterative process with mixed methods (see Table 1). The following types of data collection are planned:

- *With caseworkers: Survey on skills, knowledge, confidence to implement relationship-based practices at the start and end of project*
- *With families: Survey on views of family time and satisfaction with caseworker support for family time and on attributes that support relationship-building at the start and end of project.*
- *With children: views and experiences of the new practices using arts-based methods at end of project.*

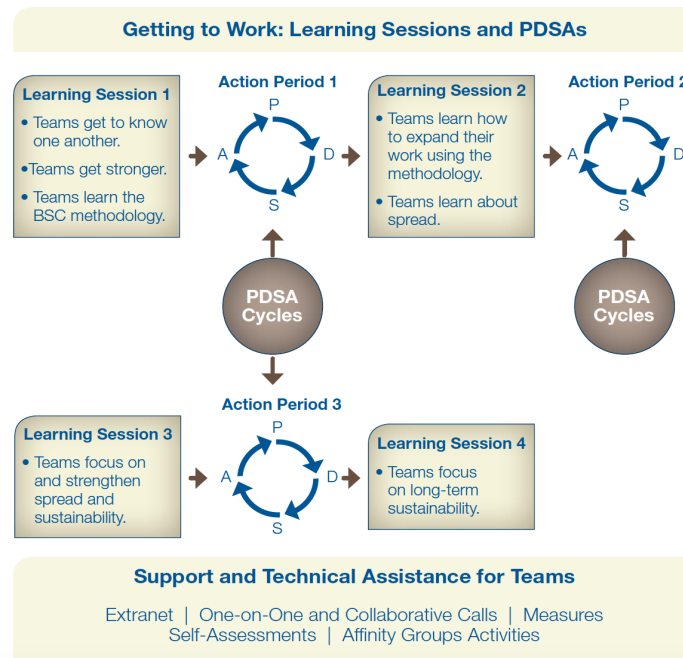
**Table 1: Research plan**

RQ	Research question	Data collection and sample	Analysis
1	<i>How can caseworkers support children’s permanent families and birth families to have positive relationships?</i>	<i>Semi-structured interviews, including surveys with measures on attitudes, knowledge and skills in relationship-building practices.  Case study presentation, demonstrating implementation of relationship-building practices.</i>	<i>Descriptive statistics, identifying changes pre- and post, and differences between sites.  Thematic analyses of case studies and qualitative interview data.</i>
2	<i>Have the new practices influenced engagement and satisfaction between children’s birth and permanent families?</i>	<i>Semi-structured interviews, including surveys with standard measures (on communication, openness to dual connection, engagement and satisfaction), conducted at baseline and end of action research phase.</i>	<i>Descriptive statistics, identifying changes pre- and post, and differences between sites and types of placements. Thematic analysis of experiences with contact and caseworker support.</i>
3	<i>Have the new practices influenced the child’s sense of security and relationship quality?</i>	<i>Structured interviews, using methods appropriate to the child’s age and functioning, conducted at baseline and end of action research phase.</i>	<i>Descriptive statistics, identifying changes pre- and post, by site and type of placements. Thematic analysis of child’s relationship experiences.</i>

## BREAKTHROUGH SERIES COLLABORATIVE

The project applies an action research approach used extensively in child welfare in the United States known as a Breakthrough Series Collaborative which brings together child welfare agencies to rapidly test strategies over about two years. This methodology is appropriate as there is evidence of the need for practice improvements and examples of promising practices (Miller & Ward, 2008). Breakthrough Series Collaborative is not about introducing new initiatives or programs but describes a process to achieve changes already recognised as needed. It creates buy-in from stakeholders like agencies and courts and then trials small changes that can maximise system improvement. Capturing the ethos of the methodology, the motto ‘What can we do by next Tuesday?’ signals how the methodology differs from other system change initiatives through a focus on rapid, achievable change not ambitious, large-scale transformation.

**Figure 1:** Action learning sessions



Source: Casey Family Programs (2011) *Timely Permanency through Reunification*.

**Table 2:** Key elements of Breakthrough Series Collaboratives

<b>Timeliness</b>	Small ideas tested rapidly rather than being held up in planning for big changes.
<b>Bottom up</b>	Knowledge and experience of workers, young people, and families. involved with the system, community partners, judges and managers are sought.
<b>Field testing</b>	Ideas are tested in real situations, not discussed at high level operational meetings.
<b>Peer learning</b>	Lessons from discoveries, successes and challenges are shared.
<b>Collaboration</b>	Partnership is emphasised within and between teams and community.
<b>Self-evaluation</b>	Teams track, monitor and report on their progress and improvements in real time.

## How it works

Local teams are guided and mentored to develop, test, improve, and spread their successful strategies during the action cycles (*Plan, Do, Study, Act*). Teams track what they do (*project intranet*) and share what they have learnt (*Learning Sessions*). When a practice has been shown to work for one team, another team may test it. Teams agree on successful practices and these are scaled up (*implementation phase*).

Finally, the project intranet will be converted to a public website owned by the sector to form an online Community of Practice. Resources developed during the project will be freely available for download to encourage transmission of good practices across New South Wales and Australia.

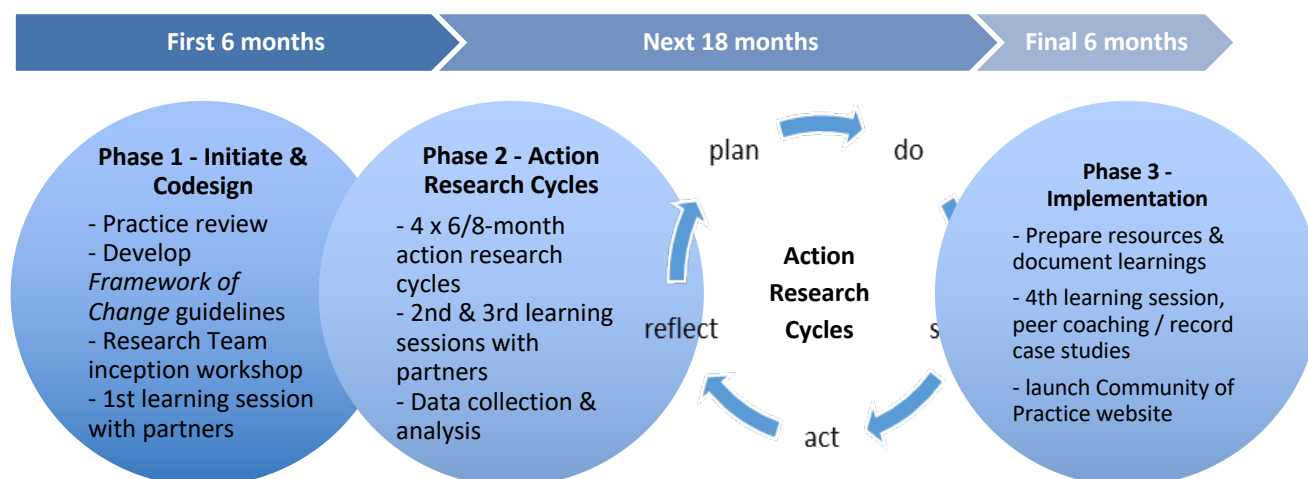
### Success factors

- **Dedicated teams** that join in local meetings and maintain regular communication with other teams via an online learning platform and at project learning sessions so they can benefit from peer-to-peer learning.
- **Committed leadership** from an 'expert faculty' that offer local team members the materials, equipment, time and expertise they need and support them to test practice changes; remove organisational barriers; and expand successful practices
- **Engagement opportunities** so each team member can interact with and learn from others and compare notes on what worked and what needed tweaking.
- **Openness to change** by team members who embrace coaching, encouragement, and support to sustain their efforts during difficult times and receive ideas that challenge their own assumptions.

## The process

Four action research teams have been formed in Dubbo, Wollongong, Maitland, and Central Sydney with Partner Organisations - DCJ, Barnardos, Care South, Catholic Care Wollongong, Catholic Care Hunter-Manning, Key Assets, Uniting and Wesley Dalmar. Two caseworkers and one casework manager from each partner organisation will meet regularly for peer support and shared learning during the 'action research cycles' (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Project phases, timeline and milestones



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## The action researcher role

### Caseworker

Caseworkers trial relationship-building practices with families they work with and collect evidence about implementing the practices including:

- reflecting on their experiences with trialling practices including what worked well and not so well and whether practices are influencing relationships between children, carers and families or family time experiences.
- providing deidentified demographic and contextual information of children and families for reporting purposes and to chart changes
- assisting with co-creation of qualitative case studies to be used as practice resources
- completing feedback questionnaires to measure impact and outcomes for families

### Casework manager

The role of the casework manager is to support your caseworkers to participate in the study. This might include time management or supporting data collection activities. Casework managers can also attend the monthly local team meetings where team members reflect on their experiences with trialling practices including what worked well and not so well and whether practices are influencing relationships between children, carers and families or family time experiences. Casework managers also provide an organisational perspective to guide the practice trials and will act as champions for the scale up of successful practices in the final stage of the project.

## Expectations

It is anticipated that action research team members will spend approximately an hour a week completing documentation related to the project. In addition, they will meet with their local counterparts every month to discuss their progress with the practice being tested, brainstorm solutions to problems that may have arisen and provide verbal feedback for data collection. Team members will also attend four 2-day Learning Sessions based in the four action research sites. These are a chance for team members to come together with each other and with the research team to share and reflect on practice trials and plan their next action cycle.

**Learning Session 1** will take place in Newcastle in February 2020.

**Learning Session 2** will take place in Wollongong in October 2020

**Learning Session 3** will take place in Dubbo in April 2021

**Learning Session 4** will take place in Sydney in October 2021.

## Project website

A website has been created to share learning materials and updates with the action research teams. This will also provide an easy way for team members to get feedback and support from the research team during action cycles.  
<https://rccf-fostering-connections.sydney.edu.au/>

## Project Governance

### Research Team

This project brings together a team of researchers with extensive applied research experience working with children, families, and communities. The Chief Investigators, co-located in the Sydney School of Education and Social Work at University of Sydney, are working with Partner Investigators from leading out-of-home care agencies and research institutes who bring international experience and local practice knowledge. Co-researchers who have personal experience with the out-of-home care system and cultural knowledge of Aboriginal Kinship will provide 'real-world' perspectives based on their lived experience. The project includes up to 2 PhD projects related to the main aims.

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## Chief Investigators

**Associate Professor Amy Conley Wright** (Lead Chief Investigator) is Associate Professor in the School of Education and Social Work and Director of the Research Centre for Children and Families (the 'Centre'). Her work has focused on building the evidence base for family support and child advocacy, in partnership with children's services organisations. Amy will provide strategic oversight to achieve project milestones, ensure regular communication for the research team and Partner Organisations, oversee operational budget, lead development of project outputs and co-supervise the Research Associate, Research Assistant and PhD students. She currently supervises early career researchers and higher degree research students in her research-only role.

**Professor Judy Cashmore** is Professor in Socio-Legal Research and Policy in Sydney Law School and has a part-time appointment in the School of Education and Social Work. She brings an extensive research background in out-of-home care, including in partnership with NSW Family and Community Services and expertise in research on children's perspectives. Professor Cashmore has supervised 4 PhD students to completion and has 3 current PhD students. She will provide guidance on measures to evaluate the impact of practice change on children across all stages, data analysis and write up of results.

**Dr Susan Collings** is Research Fellow at the Research Centre for Children and Families. She brings skills in participatory action research for practice change and the use of arts-based methodologies to engage diverse populations in research. Susan will support data collection by Partner Organisations and contribute to data analysis and write up and support the Research Associate. Susan has experience with supervision of Honours, masters and doctoral students and will co-supervise a PhD student.

**Dr Lynette Riley** is Senior Lecturer in the School of Education and Social Work. Riley, a Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi woman from Dubbo and Moree, has a distinguished background in Aboriginal education. She has collaborated with Aboriginal communities to embed cultural knowledge of Kinship into university curricula and was awarded the 2015 Vice-Chancellors' Award for Support of the Student Experience at University of Sydney, demonstrating superior skills in training and mentoring. Lynette will provide specialist guidance on cultural issues and practices related to Kinship care and will supervise aspects of the project focused on Aboriginal children and families, including the PhD student.

## International Partners

**Professor Elsbeth Neil** is Professor of Social Work at the University of East Anglia, UK. Her longitudinal research on contact after adoption and development of practice materials is highly regarded internationally. Elsbeth (Beth) will guide the Research Project Team in the modification of her practice resources to the NSW context. Beth will also contribute to data analysis and write up of results.

**Professor Peter Pecora**, Professor, School of Social Work, University of Washington and Managing Director of Research Services, Casey Family Programs. Pecora pioneered the use of the research methodology in this project within child welfare and has an international reputation for practice innovation. He will provide methodological expertise, particularly during project establishment.

## Partner Investigators

**Matthew Jones**, Director Strategy, Child and Family Directorate, will represent the NSW Department of Communities and Justice on the project, which is leading major sector reforms underway in the NSW child protection and out-of-home care systems. Matthew brings extensive policy and service development background to the project.

**Dr Robert Urquhart**, Head of Knowledge, Outcomes and Research at Barnardos Australia, a large non-government family support and out-of-home care (OOHC) agency, Robert will provide insight into the system and practice implementation issues arising from the project.

## Research staff and Research students

**Sarah Ciftci** has been employed by the Research Centre for Children and Families as a full-time Research Associate to coordinate data collection by Partner Organisations, lead data analysis and write-up, and will spend significant time in the field, providing continuity and fidelity across sites.

**Megan Mitchell** has commenced a PhD associated with the project. Her thesis will investigate cultural planning practices for Aboriginal children in care.

**Expert by Experience** consultants will be employed part-time to guide the research team based on their personal experiences of the out-of-home care system. These research 'experts-by-experience' will bring critical understanding of the issues for young people and families, including Aboriginal families. Each Expert consultant will be matched to a member of the research team and receive support and mentoring.

**Dr Betty Luu** is a Research Associate at the Research Centre for Children and Families who will provide technical knowledge and data analysis support for the data collections and coding. She has a background in child development as well as significant experience in protocol development and implementation, literature searches and reviews, ethics submissions, recruitment, data collection, collation and management of incoming data, data analysis and report-writing.

**Suzanne Pope** is the Program Manager for the Research Centre for Children and Families, providing the overall project governance, management and budgeting.

## Building the evidence base

The project uses co-design with practitioners and experts with lived experience of out-of-home-care to maximise the likelihood that the tested practice changes will be acceptable and useful. Local teams, researchers and experts-by-experience will agree on practices that were successful in the 4<sup>th</sup> Learning Session. The Parenting Research Centre will assist in training and coaching team members so the practices can be implemented with fidelity in their organisations. Enhancements in caseworkers' confidence and ability to build relationships between families, and carers' views of family time and skills to engage collaboratively with parents and extended family will be measured using pre- and post-surveys. The views of children and families will be incorporated at the completion of the project, using age-appropriate methods and semi-structured interviews, and will include the impact of new practices on engagement and satisfaction with family time. More information about these research methods will be made available on the project intranet.

## Context for the current study

In 2017, the Institute of Open Adoption Studies completed research to understand the facilitators and barriers to open adoption from care. Results from focus groups and a survey with over 100 carers in New South Wales found that concerns with facilitating contact independently presented a significant barrier to pursuit of adoption or guardianship. Foster carers viewed contact as extremely challenging due to its effects on children and negative interactions with agency staff (Collings, Wright, Spencer & Luu, 2018).

In 2018, the Institute of Open Adoption Studies (now expanded to the Research Centre for Children and Families), undertook research with almost sixty children, young people, parents, and carers in New South Wales. The study used qualitative, arts-based methods to explore contact experiences of family members and strategies used to create positive relationships between families. These results suggest a need to actively recruit caseworkers and carers with personality traits that predispose them to display empathy and compassion for parents who have faced complex social disadvantage and trauma. It also identified a need to ensure that there is a specific focus on staff induction and training to equip caseworkers with the core skills to build trust, react sensitively, listen actively and lead difficult conversations. Professional supervision can help embed reflective practice, and carer and staff training can improve trauma awareness and cultural sensitivity (Collings, Wright, & Spencer, 2019).

## The 'Menu' of Practices

During 2020-2021, local teams will trial three small practice changes each. Some examples of good practices that have been documented in the international literature and provided by partner organisations are summarised below (see Table 3). This is not an exhaustive list but intended to stimulate discussion at Learning Session 1, where team members will agree on the practice for trial during the first action cycle. Throughout the project, additional practices can be added and trialled during subsequent action cycles.

**Table 3: Relationship-building practices**

Practice	Description and Purpose	Trialled
Promoting cultural mentoring	<p><b>Aim: to promote and develop cultural identity of Aboriginal children in care</b></p> <p>Identify a cultural mentor within a child’s network who can support their relationships and cultural identity during visits. Mentor encourages parents/extended family to use visits to teach children songs, language and stories to share knowledge of family history, cultural values, customs and traditions.</p> <p>Identify at least one cultural feature that is a strength to build on for the child and include an activity related to this in visits.</p> <p><i>Dubbo team may incorporate the Wiradjuri activities developed for the project by Lynette Riley</i></p>	Underway in Cycle 2 Dubbo
Visit coaching	<p><b>Aim: to promote positive and age-appropriate parent[relative]-child interactions at visits</b></p> <p>Create natural opportunities for parents to practice parenting skills at visits and offer constructive, concrete and immediate feedback and positive reinforcement.</p> <p>Identify age appropriate interactive activities and assist parents to use these and provide immediate constructive feedback and reinforcement during visit.</p> <p><i>Examples include preparing a craft-making box to take to visits with younger children</i></p> <p>Involve older children in brainstorming activities for visits</p> <p><i>Examples include making a video or photo montage; planning menu for a shared meal next time.</i></p>	
Carer coaching	<p><b>Aim: To promote carer skills and communication with birth relatives</b></p> <p>Guide carers to actively support visits by offering parents [relatives] constructive feedback during and after visits and reinforcing positive interactions with their children.</p> <p>Initiate conversation with carers about their expectations around contact and their role in supporting it.</p> <p>Maintain regular contact with carers before/after visits to offer feedback on their efforts and encourage reflection to improve future interactions with parents[relatives].</p> <p><i>Help carers to prepare some casual ‘scripts’ for framing feedback as a suggestion not a demand</i></p> <p><i>Help carers find specific examples of positive interactions and share how they benefitted child</i></p>	Underway in Cycle 2 Wollongong
Supporting co-regulation	<p><b>Aim: To support parents and carers to understand and respond to children’s behaviour</b></p> <p>Assist birth relatives and carers to reflect on and understand their own emotions so they can respond sensitively to children’s reactions and manage behaviour that arises before/after visits.</p>	Underway in Cycle 2 Sydney and Maitland

	<p>Carers talk to child before/after visit about how they are feeling to help them find verbal expression for emotions and learn how feelings are expressed in actions. Introduce children and carers to use of coloured 'zones of regulation' to help children communicate emotional states.</p> <p>Parents[relatives] do a brief relaxation or mindfulness activity before the visit [e.g. visualisation, body scan] to connect to own emotional state and assist them to co-regulate child's behaviour.</p> <p>Carers/parents introduce a 'goodbye ritual' at the end of visits so children and relatives can adjust to separation [e.g. sing favourite songs, look at photos taken at visit, exchange transitional object].</p>	
Facilitating mediated conversation	<p><b>Aim: To promote shared understanding and empathy for birth relatives and carers</b></p> <p>Intentional conversations to mediate the relationship between children's families [NB can be incorporated into parent/carer coaching]</p> <p>Initiate an initial informal meeting between parents[relatives] and carers to exchange information about child, raise goals, hopes and fears about visits</p> <p>Initiate informal regular dialogue between parents[relatives] and carers to share updates about child, review communication [mode and frequency] between visits (in person or by technology)</p>	
Pre and debriefing with parents	<p><b>Aim: To debrief and plan for upcoming visits</b></p> <p>Meet or talk to parent before and after visit.</p> <p>Check prior to Family Time. Open-ended questions: How are you going? What's been happening? Has anything come up that might affect your next Family Time visit?</p> <p>Check after visit. Open-ended questions: What happened that made you feel good/not so good? What could I have done to help? What could you try next time?</p>	<p><b>Completed Action Cycle 1 Wollongong</b></p>
Debriefing with children, parents and carers	<p><b>Aim: To debrief and plan for upcoming visits</b></p> <p>Meet with or talk to child, parent and carer after visit. Begin with assessing what worked well and identify areas for improvement.</p> <p>Follow up open-ended questions e.g. What happened that made you feel good/not so good? What could I have done to help? What could you try next time?</p>	<p><b>Completed Action Cycle 1 Sydney</b></p>
Facilitating family time from a distance	<p><b>Aim: To support relationships between children and families from a distance</b></p> <p>Assist children and families to use technology-based communication e.g. video (FaceTime, Skype, Zoom), photo sharing, or phone calls/group chats (WhatsApp) or exchange letters, artwork, and photos.</p> <p>Support by facilitating access to iPads, prepaid envelopes and phone credit, providing instructions for how to</p>	<p><b>Completed Action Cycle 1 Dubbo and Newcastle</b></p>

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	download and use apps, providing tips on how to make video chatting fun and interactive, discussing boundaries and online safety.	
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## DETAILS OF PRACTICE EXAMPLES

1. **Cornerstone Advocacy** is a multi-modal program founded on the belief that parents do not 'visit' their children but spend time together that is safe, productive and fun. The aim is to create opportunities for children to engage in normal activities with parents such as attending children's sporting events or medical appointments, helping them with homework or going to a favourite restaurant to spend time together. The model includes visit coaching, where parents receive preparation and debriefing as well as 'in-the-moment' instructional guidance from a coach and may also involve training carers as coaches.

Practices described in Cohen, J., & Cortese, M. (2009). Cornerstone Advocacy in the first 60 days: Achieving safe and lasting reunification for families. *In Practice*, 28(3), 37-44. (article available on project intranet)

2. **Connections Project** includes preparatory and follow-up phone contact with birth and foster families to explain what parents can expect during visits. Workers recognise that parents often face chaotic lives and when they do not keep scheduled visits, remind foster parents and children to think about the good parts of prior visits and what to look forward to next time. They also help overcome barriers by assistance with arranging visits and transport.

Practices described in Gerring, C. E., Kemp, S. P., & Marcenko, M. O. (2008). The Connections Project: A relational approach to engaging birth parents in visitation. *Child Welfare*, 87(6), 5-30. (article available on project intranet)

3. **Cultural planning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children** is a practical guide for delivering culturally appropriate support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home-care to support their knowledge, connections, wellbeing and cultural identity. Focus on their participation in cultural activities and supporting family contact that is age and developmentally appropriate. Suggest use of genogram to identify kin and cultural background who can support child's cultural rights. Ensure the plan is consistent, considers child's preferences, and occurs in a community-based environment that supports parents and extended family to attend. Ensure child attends Aboriginal services, community events and connects with Elders from their community of belonging.

See: Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec) (2018). *Cultural Planning Information Suggestion Sheet*. AbSec Cultural Connection Workshop (available on project intranet).

4. **Icebreaker meetings** which involves arranging an informal catch up between parent and carer as soon as possible after placement (preferably within a week). This allows parents to share important information with carer about a child's preferences, strengths and needs. Purpose is to share information and lessen impact of parent-child separation as well as establish communication between parent-carer and allow parents to stay informed of child's development.

Practices described in Biehle, K. & Goodman, D. (2012). *Icebreaker meetings: A tool for building relationships between birth and foster parents*. Baltimore, Maryland: Annie E. Casey Foundation. (article available on project intranet)

5. **Social story book** is an approach used to help children with autism make sense of different situations. Developed by Carol Grey in 1990, social stories are booklets illustrated with drawings or photographs that are usually short, simple and have defined criteria. This approach could be used to help younger children make sense of family time.

For links to online tools visit <https://www.abaresources.com/social-stories/>

6. **Strive supervised visitation program** is an evidence-informed program that seeks to create predictable, goal-centred visits for parents and children through 1:1 coaching, preparation and debriefing. Parents practice a simple skill set from how to communicate positively with their child and the adults involved at visits to creating child safe environments.

Developed by the University of Washington's Partners for Our Children. More information available at <https://partnersforourchildren.org/projects/strive>



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