



BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS

FAMILY INCLUSION STRATEGIES HUNTER

OUTCOMES OF THE FAMILY INCLUSION PRACTICE FORUM | 18 JULY 2014

Report written by Jessica Cocks

EVERYONE WANTED ME TO STOP, WANTED ME TO FAIL... SO I DID THE OPPOSITE

Parent with children placed in out of home care



CONTRIBUTORS

This report had the support of the following organisations all of whom have a commitment to the children, young people and families of the Hunter Valley of New South Wales.

BaptistCare
CatholicCare Hunter Manning
Family Support Newcastle
Faculty of Business and Law (Politics and International Relations) University of Newcastle
Life Without Barriers
Muloobinba Aboriginal Corporation
Relationships Australia
The Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle

Our meetings, our work and the forum were held on the land of the Awabakal people. We pay our respects to the traditional owners of this land and honour their elders, past and present.

Building Better Relationships – Family Inclusion Strategies Hunter
Outcomes of the Family Inclusion Practice Forum held on 18 July 2014

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This report is dedicated to the children and young people of the Hunter Region who are in out of home care

Louie Hahn
Graphic Design



WE
LIFE WITHOUT BARRIERS
VE



Family Support Newcastle
your family, our community



Muloobinba Aboriginal Corporation



▶ *How can we support parents and family to have better relationships with their children in out of home care?*

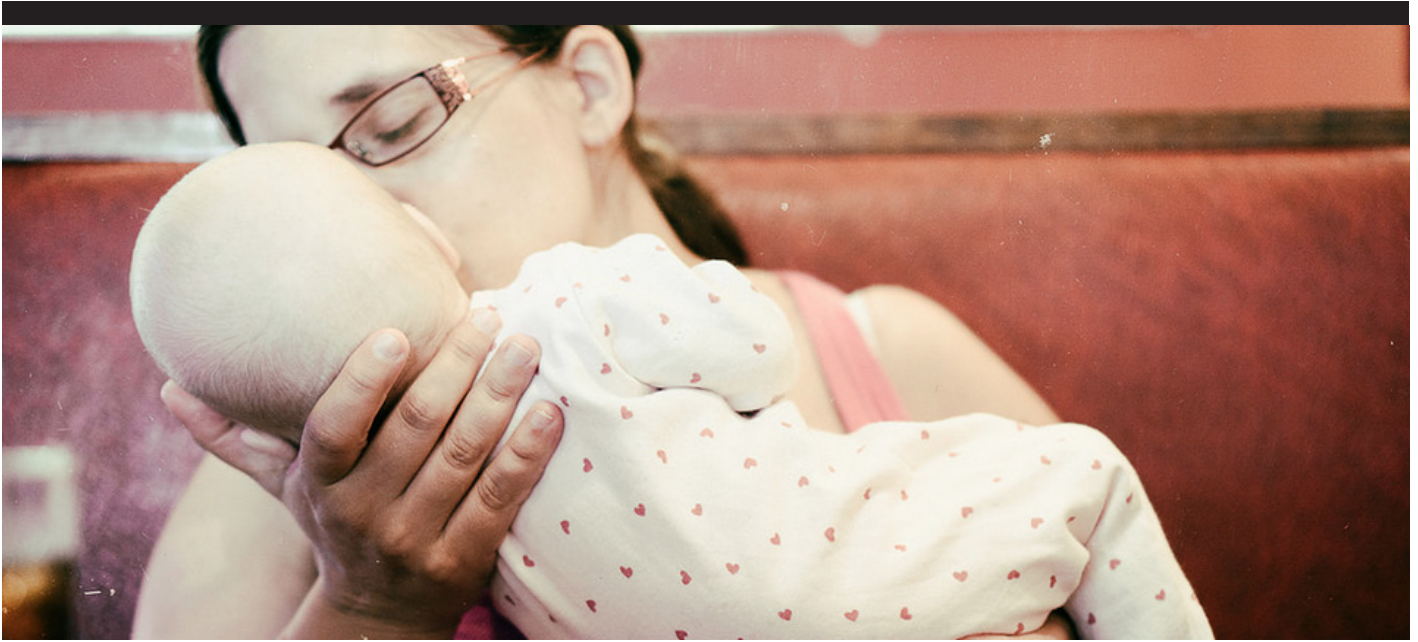


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**NOTHING IN LIFE IS A MISTAKE —
EVERYTHING IS A LESSON**





INTRODUCTION

Family Inclusion Strategies Hunter (FISH)

Family Inclusion Strategies Hunter (FISH) is a group of practitioners and family members involved or with an interest in the child protection and out of home care service system in the Hunter Valley of NSW.

This report explores the development of the FISH group and the planning, running and outcomes of the first ever family inclusion practice forum in the Hunter Valley. Firstly, the ideas and reasons for forming the FISH group are discussed.

The development of our *“wicked question”* is explored as a way of summing up and further exploring the need for greater family inclusion in children’s lives.

The decision to run a practice forum is discussed, including the FISH group’s commitment to involving parents and family from the beginning as experts and consultants for practitioners’ learning.

The themes that emerged from the practice forum are outlined in some detail. Examples include ideas for practitioners to implement in their work with families immediately, future service models, and systems change.

Future and current FISH activities in the Hunter Valley are also described and finally, reflections from parents and practitioners are provided.

METHODOLOGY

▶ METHODOLOGY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THIS REPORT



This report was part of the FISH commitment to participants attending the practice forum. The discussions at the forum were documented by FISH group members who took careful notes during the parent panel and by all participants who documented discussions during other forum activities.

The forum was purposeful in its intention to amplify the voices of parents and families who had experienced the removal of their children into out of home care for a short or long time. FISH members wanted these voices to be given an emphasis that is not often provided. In order to achieve this, the day was structured to be initiated with a facilitated parent panel process where parents considered questions from a facilitator.

The questions were prepared in advance and parents on the panel could make suggestions and give comments about them beforehand.

See Appendix A for the questions used to guide the parent panel.

▶ THE FORUM AGENDA WAS AS FOLLOWS:

A facilitated parent panel presentation from Adam, Felicity, Katie and Teegan which highlighted and explored parental experience of having children in out of home care, for a short or long time.

A brief session for participants to provide feedback to Adam, Felicity, Katie and Teegan about what they had heard and any questions.

A World Café session (*as described in Brown, 2005*). Groups of participants and parents considered two open ended questions about family inclusive practice and documented their discussions and ideas.

An Open Space session (*as described in Michael Herman Associates, 1998*). Several topics for further consideration were proposed by participants and action oriented discussions were held and documented.



The parent panel process was presented to participants explicitly as a learning opportunity. Parents were described as consultants who were willing to share their expertise and experience. Subsequent sessions flowed from the content of the panel discussion. This meant that the experiences of parents genuinely informed and educated participants.

The documented material was collated by The Family Action Centre and has informed this report.



The themes of the forum were then shared at a FISH meeting in August 2014 to check that they reflected the memories and impressions of participants. This initial thematic document was also emailed to all participants who had indicated an interest in remaining connected to the forum outcomes. Further discussions were held with parent consultants to check that quotations were accurate and to gather further reflections.

BACKGROUND

In March 2014 a group of practitioners, managers and educators in child and family services in the Hunter Valley of NSW met together to consider the circumstances and experiences of parents and family who have children in out of home care for a short or long time. Group members wanted to discuss the need to improve and increase the inclusion of family in the lives of children and young people in out of home care based on the view much more could and should be done by practitioners, managers and policy makers in early intervention, child protection and out of home care to support greater family inclusion.

High numbers of children and young people in out of home care in the Hunter region

In 2012/13 the Hunter Central Coast region of NSW had the highest rate of children and young people in out of home care in NSW (*NSW Family and Community Services, 2014*), including continuing very high rates of new entries to care. The rate is significantly higher than most other regions. NSW has the highest proportion of children and young people in out of home care in Australia with the exception of the Northern Territory (*AIHW, 2014*).

These two figures combined suggest that this region has one of the highest proportions of children and young people in out of home care in Australia.

The reasons for this are not well understood but it is a situation that has persisted over time. (*See similar statistics from 2006, NSW Department of Community Services, 2008*). There are areas of high socio economic disadvantage in the region but this does not adequately explain the disparity.

There are also very high rates of Aboriginal children in the region in out of home care (*NSW FACS, 2014*)

This region has the third highest proportion of Aboriginal children and young people in care after the largely rural and remote Northern and Western NSW regions. Again, the reasons for this have not been explained



Continuity & quality of family relationships



Research evidence suggests continuity and quality of family relationships yields improved outcomes such as increased safety for children (Howe, 2010; Hawkins, 2014) and is linked to better long term outcomes for children and young people as they leave care including improved social and emotional support, less loneliness and improved access to practical support (Mendes, Johnson & Moslehuddin, 2012; Dixon and Stein, 2005; Biehal et al, 1995; Marsh, 1999)

We also know that most children, young people and adults leaving care want more contact with their families during and after care (*Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, 2013, p. 18*).

FISH members have experienced this in their day to day work with children and families and believe opportunities exist for the service system and workers and carers to improve support for relationships between children and young people in out of home care and their families.

New law reforms in NSW and the transition program

At the time FISH was forming and during our time working together there has been considerable change occurring in the policy and legislative context of child protection and out of home care in NSW (*See FACS, 2013 for an overview of these changes*). These changes are many and cannot be adequately described in this report. Two key examples are setting legally prescribed timeframes for making decisions about long term care, and making adoption easier from out of home care without parental consent.

FISH group members held grave concerns about the potential impact of these changes on family inclusion in the lives of children and young people who are removed. The proposed changes may have damaging effects on relationships between children and young people in out of home care and their families when what is needed is improved support for these relationships. We were concerned that, without better family inclusion and a more complex analysis of the reasons why children enter out of home care, good intentions aimed at achieving stability may instead lead to greater dislocation, loss, grief and systematised trauma for children and young people removed from their families. *See for example SNAICC (2014).*



PUBLIC DISCUSSION ABOUT CHILD PROTECTION AND OUT OF HOME CARE



How might we amplify the voices of parents and family in the public discussion about child protection and out of home care

FISH members were very aware that discussions about the proposed legislative and policy changes about to take effect in NSW did not include the voices of parents and family with children in out of home care.

These changes and the practical impact of laws and policies in child protection and out of home care are too important for these voices not to be heard and parent and family perspectives to be marginalised.

There are child centred reasons for the perspectives of parents and family to be heard. Australia has signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that children have a right to be cared for by their own families whenever possible. Even when this is not possible the convention requires that children know their family. Importantly, there is a children's right that parents be supported by governments to care for them (UNICEF, 1996).

This report has already discussed how stronger and supportive family relationships can contribute to better outcomes for children and young people who leave care.

As key actual or potential contributors to better outcomes for children and young people it is very important that parents and family have the opportunity to take part in the discussion and the debate about out of home care in New South Wales and elsewhere.

Many parents who have children removed go on to experience the loss of subsequent children into out of home care (*Broadhurst and Mason, 2013*). This is despite legislative recognition in all states and territories in Australia that removal of children is not the best option and a strong argument that differential responses are needed to ensure children have every chance of being cared for by their own parents (*Tsantefski, Humphries and Jackson, 2014*). Subsequent removals are destructive and distressing for all parties including children. In order to break this cycle it is very important that parents and family have the opportunity to provide feedback about their experiences in the system and how it could be more helpful.

Not only are parents and family silent in the Australian public discourse about child protection and out of home care, there is also limited interest in their perspectives from researchers (*Harries, 2008; Cashmore and Ainsworth, 2004*). A rare Australian literature review on the experiences of parents and family found:

“there is a significant need to obtain a better understanding of the experiences of a particular group of families who have had their child / children removed from their care following intervention by a statutory body – or who have experienced the real and continuing threat of that loss”. (Harries, 2008, p. 39)

FISH hopes this is beginning to change but in the meantime there is a need to amplify the voices of parents and family in both the policy and research arenas.

LIMITED ACCESS TO SUPPORT SERVICES FOR PARENTS WHO HAVE CHILDREN IN OUT OF HOME CARE

As practitioners and managers in family support, child protection and out of home care agencies, FISH members had direct experience of the difficulties parents and families face trying to access services, both in attempting to have their children returned to their care and in maintaining ongoing relationships with their children while in care.

We knew about the systemic barriers faced by parents who were often unable to access services at key points in their interaction with the system and at times when their needs were most significant (*See for example only NSW Health 2014¹*).

These included funding guidelines and rules that prevented access by high need families and children to secondary and prevention services and, at times, universal services. Services most needed at the time their children were removed, such as parenting programs for parents who were very willing to engage in them, were often inaccessible.

Importantly, the group was aware that although parents and families needed access to universal and other family support services, such services needed to be appropriate and available. Parenting and other services need to be suitable for parents and family who have children in out of home care, whether or not restoration is the goal. We were particularly aware that there is more than one way to be a parent or a family member and, although their role may change to some degree parents do not stop being parents when children are in out of home care.



¹ Note that this is an example only of a service that is not easily accessible to parents and families with children in out of home care due to funding guidelines requiring services to support families who have not yet entered the statutory child protection system.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS WITH CHILDREN IN OUT OF HOME CARE

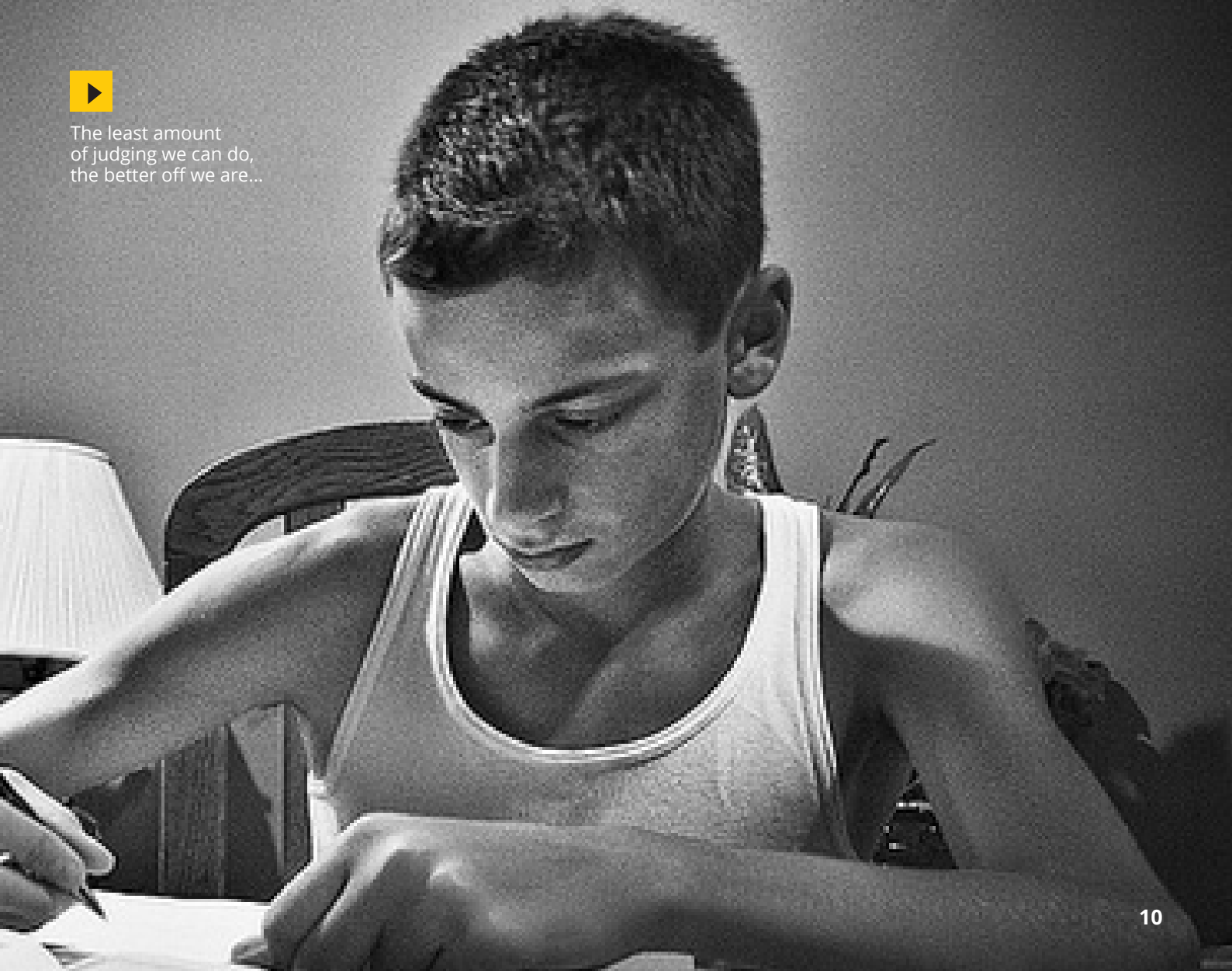
There is a need for workers in the service system to build respectful working relationships with parents with children in out of home care.

There is evidence that workers in child protection and out of home care may find it difficult to communicate empathically, provide respectful services, and build positive relationships with families and parents in the interests of children and young people (Thorpe, 2008). This is despite evidence that empathic communication (Forrester, Kershaw, Moss & Hughes, 2008) and positive parent-worker relationships (Howe, 2010) result in a better understanding of risk and potentially greater safety for children. This may represent a need for skills development. It may also occur because of prevailing values and beliefs about parents and families with children in out of home care.

The result may be practice that is disrespectful and marginalises or undervalues the very important roles that parents and families play in the lives of children and young people over time. The same explanation could be provided for the previously discussed exclusion of parents and families from legal and policy consultation and their limited access to services. More research, especially practitioner driven research, is needed to understand this issue.



The least amount
of judging we can do,
the better off we are...



THE 'WICKED' QUESTION

Continuity & quality of family relationships



A wicked problem is a policy problem that is very complex (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007).

These problems, such as the circumstances of children and young people in the child protection and out of home care systems (Allen Consulting Group, 2008), go beyond the capacity of any one organisation to understand and respond and there are often many conflicting views about the best ways to deal with them.

The FISH group became convinced that family inclusion is an important part of addressing this wicked problem and we spent some time developing our wicked question to assist us in developing a shared understanding of the problems and in developing next steps.

We did this after spending a lot of time considering and discussing what we meant by the term “family inclusion” and the many complexities of the problems that lead to children being placed in out of home care and parents and family struggling to remain involved in their lives.

We concluded agencies, governments and the legal system all need to better comprehend the experience of parents, family, children and young people and their need to have closer, more fulfilling relationships, even when children and young people cannot remain at home.

From this, our question is,

How can we support parents & family to have better relationships with their children in out of home care?

This question is aimed directly at improving and facilitating family inclusion in the lives of children and young people in out of home care.

It is inclusive of families and children where there is a plan or hopes for restoration; supported by evidence that suggests family relationships, especially between primary carer and child, are important when children are to be successfully restored (Fernandez & Lee, 2013).

It also includes those families and children who will remain separated by out of home care, again supported by evidence that when family relationships are positive, children will experience better outcomes over time (Mendes et al, 2012).



How can we support parents & family to have better relationships with their children in out of home care?

- Children and young people can express their views about the type of relationship they want to have with parents and family. Children and young people often want to return home to the care of their family but when this is not safe there is still value in facilitating close family relationships that will last beyond childhood. Children and young people can tell the service system what is needed to have the relationships they want and need with parents and family (See for example the Create Foundation, 2014).
- Parents and family can advocate for their children's need to know them and have ongoing close relationships with them. Parents and family can actively contribute to this outcome by participating in case planning and actively taking part in contact and other arrangements to build those relationships. Parents and family can also tell the service system what they need to be better supported to build and maintain relationships with their children and young people in out of home care.
- Authorised carers have an important role to play in encouraging closer family relationships for the children in their care and in developing relationships themselves with parents and family whenever possible. Carers often know children best and have a key opportunity to help children navigate and process family relationships over time in a way that is respectful and inclusive of family.
- Practitioners in family support and other welfare services can play a role in supporting and advocating for parents and family to have the opportunity to build and maintain relationships with their children in out of home care. This includes situations when children are going to remain in long term care. There is more than one way to parent children and the roles that parents and family can play are still vital to the long term wellbeing of children and young people.
- Policy makers and program developers can play a role in shifting the discourse at the policy and program level to value family relationships and to be more inclusive of family as a stakeholder group. Program developers who are crafting service models and ways of working can help ensure that family inclusion and the promotion of relationships is built into training and other implementation strategies.

This question is one that can be discussed at a range of levels and where all stakeholders in the service system can play a role

EXAMPLES



A STARTING POINT... WHY A PRACTICE FORUM?

The FISH group was formed by practitioners and managers engaged in work with families affected by the child protection and out of home care systems.

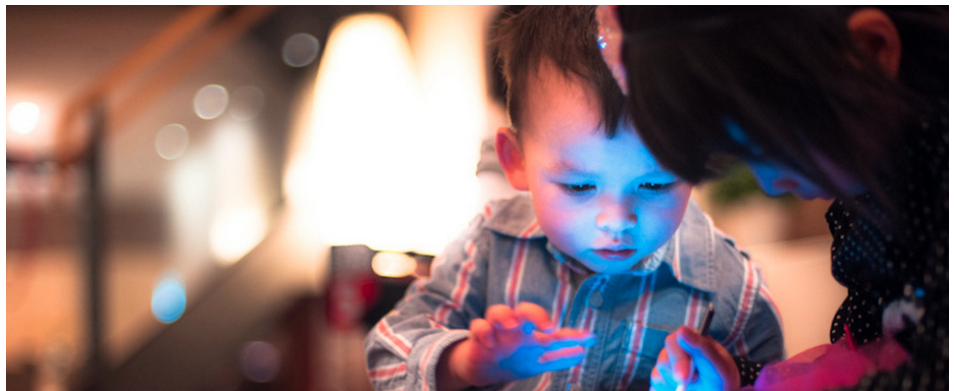
A forum seemed the ideal place to ask our wicked question of those who may be best placed in the service system to answer it – practitioners, carers and family. There was a perceived need to drive change from practice and from the experiences of children and families.

As discussed previously, the voices of families are virtually silent in the broader discussion about child protection services and system change including in research about out of home care practice in particular (*Cashmore & Ainsworth, 2004*).

The forum was ultimately run to inform and identify future strategies and ongoing sector support for improving family inclusive practice and relationships between children, young people and their families.

The group saw opportunities in a practice forum for the following:

- Practitioners to partner with parents and family to bring about change in their own practice and in the way the service system operates more broadly
- Practitioners and family to learn from each other and build on good practice that is happening in the Hunter Valley and elsewhere
- Parent voices to be heard and to directly influence practice at a local level, based on a view that workers rarely heard the perspective of parents and family in the child protection and out of home care system
- Gathering views and momentum from the broader sector and expanding involvement in discussions about family inclusion and family relationship building beyond the out of home care sector
- We shared our experiences and were able to uncover many examples of family inclusive practice and where positive outcomes had been achieved (*See for example, Battle, Bendit and Grey, 2014; Baptist Care 2014*). There were also individual stories that the group shared that were characterised by respectful partnerships and relationships between workers, carers and family members who were all focused on the wellbeing of children and young people.





PARENT PANELLISTS | Adam, Felicity, Katie and Teegan



The forum included a facilitated panel presentation from four parents who had interacted with the child protection and out of home care systems. The parents partnered with the FISH group as experts and consultants. That is, they attended the forum to share their knowledge and experience of the service system and to provide advice to participants about what had worked well and what needed to change.

Prior to the forum a number of processes took place to ensure adequate support for the parent consultants before and during the forum and to ensure there was ample opportunity for them to participate as much as possible. There was concern that some of the forum participants may have had previous or current involvement with their family and confidentiality issues needed to be addressed. There was also an obvious power dynamic in the potential participant group and a need to ensure that parents were responded to respectfully and in a way that acknowledged their generosity in taking part. Great care was taken to ensure parent consultants knew and could suggest changes to the panel questions beforehand, and could prepare their responses in advance.

After the forum debriefing and reflective discussions occurred with the parent consultants and they were asked to check records of comments during the forum.

All four parents had experience of their child or children being removed and placed in out of home care.

Two of the parents had been able to achieve the restoration of their child to their care.

One parent, at the time of the forum, was working towards restoration of her son.

One parent had three children in long term out of home care and was planning to care for her fourth child she was expecting.

Three of the parent panellists were able to remain at the forum throughout the day and contribute their expertise and experience to ongoing discussions and activities with workers



I look at my children and I'm really proud to see how, emotionally they have gotten through the last few years.

To think the nightmare they have gone through... but they have these beautiful smiles...

If these little kids can do it, I can do it.



AGENCIES ATTENDING

Allambi Youth Services
Baptist Care
Birra Li Maternal Health
- Hunter New England Health Service
CatholicCare Hunter Manning
Challenge Services
Connecting Carers NSW
Faculty of Business and Law (Politics and
International Relations) University of Newcastle
Family Support Newcastle
Impact Youth Services
Interrelate
Key Assets
Life Without Barriers
Macauley Outreach Services, Mercy Services
Northlakes Youth Counselling Services
NSW Department of Family & Community Services
Relationships Australia
Settlement Services International
Social Work Department, John Hunter Hospital
The Benevolent Society
The Canopy
The Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle
Wesley Mission
Woodrising Neighbourhood Centre

OUTCOMES



OUTCOMES OF THE FORUM



A number of key themes were identified across the various sessions and activities in the forum.

There were commonalities and connections across some themes, particularly those related to systemic change which could be related to other themes. Overall, there was a great deal of enthusiasm expressed for continuing to explore the wicked question and for further exploration of family inclusive practice in child protection and out of home care.

The key themes identified at the forum and discussed below are:

- Individual practice change
- Partnerships between carers, family and the service system
- Different models of out of home care and earlier intervention
- Opportunities for innovation
- Systemic change



INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE CHANGE

What practitioners, carers and managers can do now to be more family inclusive



This was a strong theme emerging from all sessions. Participants were eager to consider what individual practitioners and authorised carers could do in their day to day work and care with children and young people to be more family inclusive. Parents also described what had been helpful and not so helpful in their dealing with individuals in the system or in their networks

Parents highly valued non-judgemental and respectful attitudes and felt these promoted family inclusion

You need someone to listen

The worker was really aggressive. He brought his past into the situation and believed every allegation that came up

The worker was so judgemental, so unhelpful and constantly told me there was no way I was going to get my son back because of what I'd done...

Don't judge us. Every case is different. Take the time to get to know us

The need for respectful and non-judgemental work with parents was reinforced by workers. Feedback to parents acknowledged that judgemental attitudes existed and that workers had benefitted from hearing about the need for change.

This is an area where individual workers have a lot of control over their own practice as well as beginning to role model to peers in organisations.

The need to work more flexibly and responsively was raised.

One parent described how the school principal provided her with space and time to see and say goodbye to her children before they were removed.

Other examples raised were contact workers who were flexible about the length of visits and other rules and guidelines that were otherwise highly prescribed.

Workers talked about their roles being limited by funding and rules but how they could and would stretch their roles to be more family inclusive.

For example, one early intervention service worker described providing some support to parents of children in out of home care, even though this was outside of strict funding guidelines, by working flexibly and collaboratively with others.

Collaboration and partnership between workers, carers and parents

is something that individual workers can start to support immediately. OOHC caseworkers can ensure parents and family are included in case planning processes and in decision making in a more genuine way and that parent and family voices are amplified.

This can be enhanced by parents being informed by workers about agency processes and how they can participate. Carers can request to meet parents and family early, establish lines of communication and build relationships in support of children and families.

There's only one agency that lets me be a part of the case plan. Parent with three children in care in three different agencies

My agency lets me be part of the case plan. Restoration is now all our focus.

The role of authorised carers is vital in our current system.

Parents shared their experience of working with supportive and inclusive foster carers who helped facilitate their role as parents.

I tried really hard to keep my role as a parent. I wrote a care diary with his foster carers. They've been really good... providing me with heaps of photos at each visit and filling in the diary with what he's been doing... kept me really engaged as a parent.

I've been really fortunate with the foster carers... able to leave the room after each visit and know that he's loved.

My daughter's carer rang me and brought her round to see her new baby brother. She did this because she knew how important it was to all of us.

Ideas and stories emerged throughout the forum about how carers and parents can work in partnership together to care for children and how carers and parents can have positive relationships in the interests of children and young people.

This is something individual carers and parents can try and achieve with the support of OOHC agencies that can develop policies and practices that are family inclusive.

The need for reflective practice was highlighted in the world café and open space sessions. Participants wanted to think about their work differently and see things from the perspective of parents and family while having a child focus.

The need to challenge conventional ways of thinking and assumptions was also raised. Some of these conventional ideas included beliefs about the capacity of people to make change in their lives and a belief that 'real parenting' only occurs when children and parents live together.

Participants can begin to work more reflectively immediately and challenge and question conventional ideas and beliefs of their colleagues and managers.





Nothing in life is a mistake...

Some of the preconceived ideas and assumptions that participants identified as needing to be challenged included:

Parents can't or won't change.

We have to choose between parent's rights and children's rights.

People who have their children placed in out of home care are all bad parents and always will be.

You stop being a parent; you no longer have a parent role when your children are placed in long term out of home care.

Attachment theory means parents should have very little contact with their children in out of home care and that parents and family should not be included in children's lives.



Parent panellists made an important contribution to assisting participants to reflect on the beliefs and assumptions they may have held and to think about how those beliefs may be impacting on how they work with children and families.

I'm someone different today... they need to see you as a person, no matter what.

I look at my children and I'm really proud to see how emotionally they have got through the last few years. To think the nightmare they have gone through – not only in the last 3 years but what I've put them through as well – but they have these beautiful smiles...

If these little kids can do it, I can do it.

I'm proud I've got to where I am now... it's brought me a long way" "Nothing in life is a mistake – everything is a lesson.

I (now) have the ability to constantly look at myself and check in with where I'm at... to be emotionally present for them today... because in the past I wasn't.

There was discussion about the need to see family inclusive practice as underpinned and informed by attachment theory – not opposed to it.

Children can have healthy attachments to more than one person – children can understand and form these attachments so long as the adults are OK with it.



Children need their parents in their lives, one way or another.

It really helps to know the carers, to have some kind of connection with the carers.

This theme emerged from the parent panellists' reflections on how positive relationships with carers had assisted them in their parenting role, and from the world café and open space sessions which highlighted the potential for carers and family members to work together in the interests of children.

These relationships need to be supported and encouraged by agencies and by the broader service system, even when restoration is not the case plan goal.

Family contact is a key area where carers and family can work together and parents talked about how challenging it was to manage family contact and to keep their emotions in check.

A number of ideas emerged from discussion including carers and parents keeping a communication book, flexible contact options including phone calls and Skype, and carers and parents planning contact together.



PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN CARERS, FAMILY AND THE SERVICE SYSTEM

Some agency policies and procedures may make it difficult for carers and parents to meet and work together productively. For example, some agencies discourage parents, family and carers from meeting together informally and routinely structure case planning meetings so parents, family and carers do not meet together.

Others have policies that will delay parents and carers meeting until after placements have reached a certain degree of stability and then only allow meetings to occur under the supervision of paid staff.

There are opportunities for organisations to look at their current approaches and ways of working and try and make these more family inclusive and more conducive to partnerships between carers and family.

I definitely think it comes from the caseworker – if they have a relationship with the family, if this is trusting, then this will mean a better culture, a better relationship with the carer.



DIFFERENT MODELS OF OUT OF HOME CARE AND EARLIER INTERVENTION



The world café and open space sessions generated a number of ideas for innovative ways of working with family and for providing care with vulnerable children and young people

Fostering Families – not just the child

Participants shared ideas around expanding the notion of foster care to be inclusive of the whole family, not just the child. This approach may involve a combination of voluntary help and professional help, partnering with the family to increase safety and well being of children.

Examples of how this may lead to increased levels of safety for children are the provision of respite care which may reduce the parental burden of care, increased levels of social support which may also expand the child's social support network and protective factors, and the provision of practical assistance.

We are like aunties in the children's lives. I feel like we have adopted the whole family.

There is a real risk... it's very likely that without this support that all the children would have been removed and may have been separated from each other as well as from mum.

Respite care for children who are still at home which is both planned and available in a crisis situation

Participants talked about the aunts and uncles program (Brennan & Crowe, 2002) that was previously available in the Central Coast and on the Mid North Coast of NSW as an example of a respite care program for vulnerable children.

This model was for planned respite over time, usually on a monthly or fortnightly weekend basis.

Children were cared for on a regular basis by pseudo aunts and uncles who also formed supportive and long term relationships with their parents and other adult family members. It was seen as important that these carers became part of the child's support network and genuinely accepted children into their families. Use of respite care as a preventative measure to reduce risk to children and young people should not be seen as "evidence" that parents are failing to cope.

Respite care should be part of a case plan to support families look after children. They should be the same carers each time. It should be child focused, not just a break for the parents.

Shared care and shared parenting

In this model the children may be in long term out of home care but there is a genuine partnership between parents, carers and workers in case planning and in parenting. In these arrangements children would be likely to have relaxed and informal contact with their parents through and with their carers. This may or may not include overnight stays but would mean that parents stay actively involved in their children's lives according to their ability, any protective issues and according to children's changing needs and wishes.

18 year orders are made in a point in time. Things change and kids should be able to have overnight visits with their parents if they want.

▶ OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATION

There were a number of ideas for innovations, both one off and ongoing. These were varied and include direct service provision, reviewing and developing existing services (family contact) and training /education and development ideas.

Support and advocacy with parents including a support worker

As children are removed, the parents would also get an allocated support worker. Participants felt this worker should come from the NGO sector and be independent of statutory authorities. Parents and other participants talked about the difficulties in getting support partly because of the high level of stigma that parents feel after having children removed.

Discussion occurred around this worker having various roles including personal

support, advocacy and assistance in navigating the system including attending meetings with the government child protection agency and with other relevant people.

If I had my support worker from day dot I wouldn't have been through all that stuff. Once I got hold of her we just kept going and going and never gave up.

When you are acting on high emotions, it's hard to be professional when the worker is being judgemental.

(I needed) a support worker to say "this is what you need to do"... get into counselling services and have a point of contact to talk on your behalf to the Department, because when you are in that state of heightened emotions it can be really hard to be professional with the Department.

My children have been removed for three years and all the help I've had has been in the past year.





I don't think people know what to say to somebody who's had a child removed... there's a massive stigma... there's a lot of judgement

Resources for parents who have children removed

Resources are needed to assist parents to navigate the system and to deal with the aftermath of having children removed. The development of an information pack was suggested which parents could read in their own time or with a support person. This may include information about a range of topics and where help might be found.

We need a starter information pack when Community Services gets involved.

We need legal information and information about what to do and what is happening...

We need information about contact visits.

Support groups for parents and family who have had their children removed

These are currently provided in the Newcastle and Central Coast metropolitan areas by Relationships Australia and BaptistCare.

Few parents are able to access these groups relative to the numbers of families affected by child removal. There are no ongoing support groups. Participants felt that further exploration of support groups and their usefulness for parents with children in out of home care should occur with a view to increasing access to support. One of the benefits of support groups is the potential for peer support to develop among parents.

Also needed are support groups for siblings and children in care.

Skill development with workers and carers

Training and resource development is needed for OOHC caseworkers, foster carers and other workers in the service system concerned with promoting and supporting family inclusion and family inclusive practice.

This will help address the communication and respectful practice barriers that parents and family face in their dealings with the service system.

Carers need ongoing training and review about working with families and understanding about what restoration means for kids.

Parenting programs aimed at restoration and at parenting when children are placed in out of home care

Parenting programs and specialised, flexible support services including practical assistance for parents and children who are being reunified after periods in out of home care. Support for restoration is a major need in the Hunter Valley and elsewhere and parenting programs need to be tailored to the needs of families who may not yet have their children in their care.

There also needs to be support provided for parents who have children remaining in long term care to explore and adapt their parenting role to these circumstances. Parents do not stop being parents when children are removed and they need to continue to play a role in their children's lives.

More forums that critically reflect on the way we work

Ongoing forums regarding innovative practice in out of home care including a range of issues.

Some that were mentioned were forums to hear the voices of other stakeholders and a forum on how practices and procedures for removing children could be improved in the interests of children and families.

Family relationships support, not just contact supervision

Family contact services are already available in the Hunter valley. However, these services are largely focused on supervision and not on planning or facilitating quality contact.

These services should be reviewed and introduce a focus on family inclusion, participation from children, quality and planning.

Parents spoke eloquently about not knowing what to expect at contact visits, feeling confused about what they were allowed to do and often feeling scrutinised and judged in the process. Parents also felt unable to complain about contact arrangements given their relative lack of power, including when their children were not there for a planned visit. One parent spoke about several years of contact visits where there had been no change at all in highly structured contact arrangements.

Despite their being no incidents or problems she and her children continued to have three separate supervisors (one for each child) throughout contact visits, all with a primary supervisory and monitoring role rather than a supportive role, and no opportunity for contact planning.

It is heartbreaking as a parent. (When the children are not there)





When contact workers were supportive and encouraging this was very helpful to parents.

I needed someone to explain about contact... what can you do, what is OK. I didn't know what I could do or not do... change a nappy, give him a bottle.

It's good to have a supervisor there who's not judgemental... had one lady who every time I went to do something she would comment... made me feel incompetent as a parent.

A supervised visit at a park is better than a supervised visit in a hot room, with toys that are broken... under the microscope.

You can tell the people who are there just to get paid and the people who are there with their hearts in it.

I was there to spend time with my son... and not sit and talk to them [contact supervisor] about my story.

One worker encouraged me, got to know me, developed a relationship with me – that was great





SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Many of the ideas and issues already covered in this report are also concerned with systemic change. The development of alternative OOHC arrangements and the development and review of family contact and other support services are all linked to systemic change. However, participants and parents all raised issues around systemic barriers and obstacles to support for parents that work against family inclusion and better relationships between parents, family and children.

Parents shared their experiences about not knowing what to do and getting no information from statutory authorities on what to do next.

You are a parent. You definitely know you are, but you feel so distant. I didn't get to be able to bond and firm those bonds... Instead I had all these obstacles.

... On my own shoulders to get out and do it all myself.

Everyone wanted me to stop, wanted me to fail... so I did the opposite.

Weren't even telling me what I needed to do to be considered for restoration. Didn't get care plan identifying what to do until signed orders.

Other participants talked about barriers to their services because of funding guidelines.

Families seeking access to parenting programs and other supports could not find them. Parents needing access to drug and alcohol services often had to wait long periods for entry and had to leave their communities. They had to find these services without support at a time when they were emotionally overwhelmed and experiencing profound grief and loss.

Parents who sought restoration achieved this on their own or with limited support. Intensive support pre and post restoration was largely unavailable for this group of parents and this was reinforced by other participants who talked about the lack of support for families, especially post restoration.



REFLECTIONS ON THE PRACTICE FORUM

Feedback from participants and parent panellists was overwhelmingly positive. Many participants talked about learning from parent experiences. Feedback suggested that despite many participants working regularly with parents with children in out of home care they had never heard their stories or had the opportunity to learn from these before.

Thanks for being so open and sharing your story... I learnt so much about what is helpful and what is not. You have given me lots of ideas of things we could do and we are really keen to build better relationships between birth families and the kids we work with.

I learnt so much from you that I will carry every day into my work with parents and children.

Thank you for teaching us. You have changed the way I think and will change the way I practice... Thank you.

You have given me lots of ideas of things we could do and we are really keen to build better relationships



Feedback also broadly reflected the need for systemic change that participants identified either before coming to the forum or as a result of attending.

It would be good for this [supporting and empowering parents] to be directed towards systemic change.

[Need to] continue to work to educate stakeholders so policy, procedures and practice change.

[Suggest] Advocate and promote a new style of fostering. For instance, fostering the whole family.

IDEAS FOR ACTION... AND NEXT STEPS

Ideas for action were generated by all participants towards the end of the practice forum. They were informed by earlier discussions and the experiences of parents. They are linked to the themes of the forum and the practice experiences of participants. FISH continues to meet regularly in the Hunter area and continues to attract interest from practitioners who want to be more family inclusive.

To put the ideas from the forum into practice, FISH has developed a number of sub groups to work on projects, both short and long term, to build family inclusive practice and most importantly, to continue the conversation.

The sub groups are listed below and report regularly to the larger group.

1

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

This group is planning a research to practice forum to be held in early 2015. This forum will be inclusive of the voices of family, of researchers and of other stakeholders. Evidence supporting family inclusive practice is growing and emerging in Australia and overseas and the forum will present some examples of this from two prominent researchers in the field. It is hoped this forum will attract interest from practitioners and managers who want to improve their practice in child protection and out of home care by being more family inclusive and informing their practice with research and evidence.

2

CARER AND WORKER SUPPORT

This group aims to amplify practice change opportunities in a range of ways including training, resource development and giving workers and carers opportunity to support each other to be more family inclusive. Apart from a worker and carer discussion and support group there are plans to develop information and training resources for workers and carers to promote and encourage greater family inclusion.

3

RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

This group aims to develop information and other resources for use with parents in contact with the child protection system including when children are removed. Ideas include the development of an information pack to be given to parents when children are removed which will include legal information, contact numbers, information about the system, and what they can expect.

Ideas common to all three sub groups and where FISH hopes to continue to gather momentum include sharing stories of family experiences, exploring practitioner views and debates about working with parents and families, and documenting carer and family partnerships when children are in out of home care.

CONCLUSION



FISH and the practice forum has established important first steps for improving family inclusive practice. This is focused initially on the Hunter but has the potential to inform national and international initiatives with the same objectives. Prioritising the voice of parents and families with children in out of home care is a major achievement of the forum and will remain a key focus of FISH activities.

There are already indicators of communication, respect and partnerships between parents, carers and practitioners improving and commitments from practitioners to re-think their ideas and approaches with parents and families. Family inclusive practice is a challenge for everyone. Values and beliefs noted in this report and highlighted in some of the comments from forum participants are fundamental influences on this challenge and the key to change.

FISH aims to bring these groups together regularly in various ways, using personal contact to shift values, continue learning, and change relationships. This ultimately needs to inform systemic change, which is a greater challenge, but necessary to change and legitimise the role of parents and family of children and young people in out of home care.

The last word in this report should go to parent panellists who have continued to be involved in FISH and made important contributions to the development of this report. Parents also had their beliefs and assumptions challenged and above all, felt they were listened to and respected.

Out of Home Care workers didn't get defensive, didn't pick faults... this was surprising to me.

It was good to be heard... people were willing to look at the way they work and include families more... I was humbled. So many people who didn't hold the stigma I'd come across.

Really good to find people willing to work with me without judgement... everyone listened. You could hear a pin drop during the parent panel.

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APPENDIX A

▶ QUESTIONS WITH PROMPTS USED IN PARENTING PANEL

1. After your children were removed what happened for you?
 - a. Did you get the services you needed?
 - b. Did you know what to do next?
 - c. Who was there to support you?
 - d. Were resources available for you to help parent your children?
 - e. What did you need from workers at this point?
How did they respond?
2. What was it like when your children were restored to your care?
 - a. Did you get the services you needed?
 - b. Did you know what to do next?
 - c. Who was there to support you?
 - d. Were resources available to help parent your children?
 - e. What did you need from workers at this point?
How did they respond?
3. What were the things that workers did that were most helpful?
4. What were the things that were less helpful?
5. When your children are in out of home care, how do you feel your role as a parent changes?
 - a. How do your relationships with your children change?
 - b. What can/should others do around you to support your continuing role as a parent?
 - c. What sorts of things do you do to continue to be a parent when your children are in out of home care?
 - d. What do you see as your strengths as you continue parenting your children when they are in out of home care?
 - e. What advice would you give to other parents who have children in out of home care to continue to be a parent to their children?
6. If your children need to be in out of home care and not with you then what is your ideal placement for them? What would you like them to experience?
7. What advice do you have for workers in family support and out of home care agencies about working with parents who have had their children placed in out of home care?
8. What are contact visits like for you and your children? What is your advice to workers about how to arrange and support family contact? What advice would you have for authorised carers who are supporting family contact and family relationships?
9. What are some things about your children and yourself that you are really proud of?



Hope is important because it can make the present moment less difficult to bear. If we believe that tomorrow will be better, we can bear a hardship today.

Thich Nhat Hanh



BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS

FAMILY INCLUSION STRATEGIES HUNTER

OUTCOMES OF THE FAMILY INCLUSION PRACTICE FORUM
