FAMILY INCLUSION ROUNDTABLE

2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

University of Newcastle

NuSpace, Hunter Street, Newcastle

Wednesday 24 April 2024

Contents

The evidence shows that current policy settings and practices within the child protection and out of home care systems undermine the parent and family role in children's lives and damage the ongoing connections that children need with their parents and families. This can be addressed through family inclusion.

Family inclusion is the active and meaningful participation by children, parents, family and kin in child protection and out-of-home care processes at a policy and practice level, so that children remain meaningfully connected to their families. Through family inclusion, children experience active and meaningful family participation in their lives, that strengthen their connections and family relationships. Family inclusion is linked to improved outcomes for children including prevention, restoration, and relational permanence.

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Acknowledgements

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Participating organisations and groups

> An important point made during table discussions was that while the link between family participation and better outcomes for children is understood, family inclusion is good and important in and of itself.
>
> **It is a socially just and ethical thing to do.**

1. Purpose and background

The Roundtable brought together researchers who have published on family inclusion with parent- and family-led organisations, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), leaders who wish to promote family inclusion, peak organisations (i.e., Absec, ACWA, FAMS, ALS), and other key stakeholders including carers and practitioners who work in the child protection and out-of-home care (OOHC) sectors.

The focus was on exploring how best to translate recent research findings about family inclusion into policy and practice throughout New South Wales (NSW) and to couple that with work already done through the leadership of organisations and communities that have been promoting family inclusion for years, in particular, Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter Inc. (FISH) and Grandmothers Against Removal NSW (GMARNSW).

The Roundtable process was participatory and action oriented. It was designed and organised by a team of parents and family with lived experiences and stakeholders from relevant organisations. The goals of the Roundtable were to develop:

- Greater understanding and a shared definition of family inclusion.
- Commitments to agreed principles and strategies to underpin the development of family inclusive policy and practice.

Relevant research prompted the Roundtable. The most recent was a local study presented in a research report, *'Just Work as a Team': Reconstructing family inclusion from parent, carer and practitioner perspectives.*[1] The report details findings from focus groups and semi structured interviews with parents, DCJ and other child protection and OOHC practitioners, lawyers, support service practitioners, foster carers, kinship carers, and adoptive parents. The next logical step from this research was to look at how the findings could inform a major strengthening of family inclusion across systems and processes to be actively valued by people around children who are, or are at risk of, removal and living in OOHC.

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2. Status of child protection and out-of-home care

Currently, there are long-term and ongoing challenges within the child protection and OOHC systems, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Restoration rates are critically low, and the punitive, risk-focused approach taken in child protection emphasises substantial power disparities between families and the system. This prompts systemic distrust that discourages early engagement with services for some families and difficulties for others to engage effectively, if services are available.

Children who leave OOHC often face diminished life expectancy, educational challenges, issues with substance use, and reduced employment opportunities. Therefore, it is essential to provide greater support to families so that children do not enter OOHC or can return to their families safely as soon as possible if they need to be in OOHC short term. More information about the status of child protection and OOHC was provided in the research literature overview presented by Dr Nicola Ross during the Roundtable which highlighted: [2]

- Challenges experienced by children, parents, kin, and other stakeholders
- Practice barriers to parent participation
- Promising approaches and new directions.

3. Definition of family inclusion

This was the working definition of family inclusion used during the Roundtable informed by the research noted above (Ross et al., 2023). It emphasises "active and meaningful participation" in all processes focused on improving children's outcomes.

During the Roundtable, this definition was a reference point for discussing questions and different journey stages allocated to groups. Table groups also commented on how to improve it.

> **Family inclusion** is the active and meaningful participation by children, parents, family and kin in child protection processes at a policy and practice level so their ongoing valuable role in children's lives and connections to their children are maintained and strengthened. Family inclusion is linked to improved outcomes for children including prevention, restoration, and relational permanence.

Noteworthy for any work on defining family inclusion is that **family inclusion is not a practice. It is an experience,** and it is reliant on families, led by families, with support and advocacy from practice. Practices may create the conditions for inclusion, but they are not inclusion in themselves. As such, we may refer to **family inclusion as a 'principle'**.

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[2] The full report contains more detail about these elements and Appendix 3 of the full report contains the slide presentation for this literature overview.

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4. Roundtable overview

Agenda: There was a full program for the day, central to which were table discussions with mixed groups of participants providing various perspectives on family inclusion and related challenges and ideas. The agenda for the day (below) was focused primarily on the current context of family inclusion and participants suggesting reforms for improvement:

1. Acknowledgement of Country & Welcome
2. Minister's statement
3. Keynote Presentation
4. Family Inclusion Research Overview
5. Table Discussions – Part One
6. Table Discussions – Part Two
7. Feedback, wrap up, and networking

Participants and speakers: A mixed of organisations, groups, and family and community members participated in the Roundtable. The full report details table group members. The Roundtable was facilitated by Associate Professor Wendy Foote (UoN, Social Work) and the following speakers opened the Roundtable and provided context:

- Assoc Prof Amy Maguire, Director, Centre for Law and Social Justice (Welcome)
- Hon Kate Washington MP (Letter of support to Roundtable)
- Hon Sharon Claydon MP (Introduction of Keynote Speaker)
- Aunty Deb Swan, Grandmothers Against Removal NSW (Keynote Presentation)
- Hon Assoc Professor Nicola Ross (Family Inclusion Research Overview)
- Tammy Prince-Doyle, FISH President (Opening Discussions)
- Rachel Evans, FISH Peer Support and Advocacy Service (Opening Discussions)

Focus of groups: Each table discussion group was allocated one of the following stages of a family's journey to focus their responses to some of the Roundtable questions:

- Prior to application to children's court
- Legal proceedings on foot but children not removed yet
- During Court/Just after removal
- Permanently placed in OOHC
- Governance & Strategy

Reports: Two types of reports were created from the Roundtable. This *Executive Summary and Recommendations* document is extracted from the full report. The two reports are:

1. *Full Report:* Provides extensive detail about the content of Roundtable discussions and suggestions from various groups.
2. *Short Report:* A very brief snapshot of Roundtable activities and recommendations, referring readers to the full report for more.

5. Roundtable discussions, outcomes, and ideas

The range of concerns and ideas covered during the Roundtable implied that the outcomes listed below were critical. They could be facilitated by many of the suggestions made by Roundtable participants for improved service and program features. Coupled with the two sets of Roundtable recommendations, the issues and outcomes identified by participants provide a sound basis for action to establish family inclusion as a constant principle in child protection and OOHC as well as other children's organisations.

All responses to the various questions posed during the Roundtable provide early blueprints for strengthening family inclusion and embedding it across a family's journey in child protection and OOHC from the moment their circumstances place them at risk of child protection involvement in their lives.

Amongst an inordinate amount of both concerns and ideas, there were some contributions that melded issues and outcomes. Significant were the importance of:

- Greater voice for families and communities around children
- Shifting towards a strength-based, non-adversarial framework
- Challenging biases and assumptions

The range of concerns and ideas covered during the Roundtable implied the following outcomes were critical. Coupled with the recommendations from the Roundtable, they provide a sound basis for initiating action to establish family inclusion as a constant and strong principle and feature of child protection and OOHC:

- More family voice
- Community-led initiatives
- Legal and institutional reforms
- Practice informed by lived experience
- Changes led from the top
- Strengthened alliances for family inclusion

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5.1. Issues and gaps

Roundtable participants identified a broad range of gaps and issues which were categorised according to the following list. Of particular concern were the following:

- How 'family' is defined
- Shortcomings in including family
- Absence of practices that appropriately and effectively acknowledge parents' and families' agency and their ability to be part of decisions about their children.

Most identified shortcomings were systemic barriers at all stages of a family's journey through child protection and OOHC. Gaps and issues experienced or observed Roundtable participants were the need to address:

- Recognition and understanding of family
- Culturally appropriate services
- Communication and information
- Building relationships in the sector
- System and funding issues
- Governance and measuring impact

5.1. Ideas for improvement

Roundtable participants provided an extensive range of suggestions about how the identified gaps in services and programs might be addressed to improve family inclusion across a family's journey.

Groups talked about what systems, policies, and practices should look like when they have family inclusion as a central commitment.

> Emphasis was on participatory, action-oriented processes that optimise family inclusion in the lives of their children and in decisions about their children's safety and wellbeing.

Overarching this was the importance of family and community leadership of initiatives and promotion and visibility of family inclusion at all levels of organisations, in all practice methods with families and communities, and at every stage of a family's journey over time.

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Discussion group ideas for improvement were grouped under the headings below (more detail in full report). Many participants noted the importance of governance reforms as fundamental to the success of suggested changes and strengthening family inclusion.

- **Across a family's journey**
    - Promoting family safety
    - Strengthening and repairing relationships
    - Acknowledging parent and family agency
    - Purposeful communication and information
    - Constructive funding, design, and system features
    - Tracking and improving family inclusion
- **Culturally appropriate services**

- **Early Intervention stage**
    - Connections and attachments
    - Family-focus versus worker-focus
    - Community- and family-led initiatives
- **System changes and resources**
    - Diversionary programs
    - Place-based solutions
- **Post-removal**
- **Restoration**
- **Governance**

Groups were asked to identify examples of family inclusion in existing services and programs. They were extremely limited. Noteworthy were FISH, GMARNSW, and the Winha-nga-nha List at Dubbo Children's Court. The absence of an adequate range of established family inclusion organisations or initiatives stressed the need for much more work to embed family inclusion principles across systems.

5.1.   The power of lived experiences

The final questions and activities for the Roundtable looked more specifically at how people with lived experience can support family engagement and be part of policy and practice development and reform. There was general agreement that, across the sector, people with lived experience should be employed, paid, and part of workforce development strategies.

> Across many groups, there was recognition of the importance of families being the central focus of, and advisers for, family inclusive policy and practice.
>
> Other discussions about governance and leadership also supported the notion that family inclusion is both a process and an outcome.

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When participants were asked how to raise the value placed on lived experience as expertise and on engaging with people who have lived experiences, critical elements of the responses were the importance of:

- identifying who and what family is for every child in their respective communities
- connecting and seeking input from children and young people and considering the roles that they might play in decision making
- understanding and promoting family inclusion as an ethical principle
- leading change "from the top"
- creating a culture of family inclusion that is *visible* as soon as a family has contact with child protection and OOHC systems.

> Across the sector, we need to employ and pay people with lived experience and build them into our workforce development strategy. That needs to be part of all organisations involved in the sector and across the context of the work we do, and included in all aspects of practice, policy, governance, and leadership.

5.1. Maintaining momentum for family inclusion

The day concluded with proposed actions for maintaining the momentum created by the Roundtable and to begin the complex process of implementing the blueprints provided through the issues and ideas proposed by the Roundtable.

Central to those actions is continuing to build existing alliances already formed by family inclusion organisations, especially FISH and GMARNSW. They should continue to be comprised of families, researchers, practitioners, and organisations committed to embedding family inclusion as an ethical principle that is part of child protection and OOHC culture, leadership, and practice and at all levels and across communities.

> FISH and GMARNSW are in an ideal position to lead the strengthening of existing alliances and collaborative initiatives and (if considered suitable) to also lead the work of embedding family inclusion across children's organisations.
>
> They have existing employees, members, and allies who can constitute a foundation for a larger alliance to push reforms and initiatives that were suggested at this Roundtable and noted in research that preceded and informed this Roundtable as well as existing family inclusion initiatives already started in the sector.

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6. Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from research, the Roundtable, and from parent and family leadership. They can continue to be driven by an alliance of parents, family and community with collaboration and partnership of other agencies and organisations in the sector. It is acknowledged that FISH and GMAR NSW have been pivotal in leading this work to date and they should lead any alliance and collaborative initiatives that are focused on family inclusion. **Two sets of recommendations** are presented. The first are four major recommendations representing a summing up of issues and suggestions from the Roundtable. The second are more specific and are direct suggestions from table discussion groups, connected to stages of a family's journey through the system.

6.1.   Recommendations (overarching)

1. **Develop a reliable system of accountability and governance to embed family inclusion as a principle in child protection and care organisations** that is backed by transparent data collection and applied across systems and services. Mechanisms that are accessible and led by family and young people are necessary to build accountability directly to young people, families and communities. Governance structures in all organisations must ensure family participation in authentic and tangible ways.

2. **Develop local parent and family advocacy centres**, led by parents, families and communities, employing multidisciplinary team approaches, with an advisory committee structure and research and evaluation that emphasises social, economic and cultural impacts for families. It is recommended that the first of these centres be established in the Hunter Valley and that FISH be funded to deliver it in partnership with GMAR NSW and other community- and family-led groups, including ACCOs.

3. **Develop a NSW peer workforce and leadership strategy for child protection** which includes building the capability of government and non-government organisations to integrate a lived experience workforce and authentic lived experience leadership and strengthen family inclusion across systems and services. FISH has the expertise and experience to lead and deliver this strategy on behalf of the sector. The strategy should include both government and provider organisations explicitly promoting, funding, and resourcing active involvement of peer advocates in support, advocacy, and reform across individual, group, community, and system levels.

4. **Research children and young people's views and experiences of family inclusion**. This recognises that children and young people may have a different lens on their situation to their parents and families but are still integral to family inclusion. It will add to the existing knowledge base about family inclusion and inform future research initiatives. Importantly, it will inform how to move ahead ethically with children and young people as joint leaders of the Family Inclusion Alliance along with other family members with lived experience.

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6.2. Recommendations (process stages)

The following recommendations are direct from different Roundtable discussion groups, related to more significant points in a family's journey through child protection and OOHC. They are an important contribution for future work by government and organisations to embed family inclusion principles across policy and practice. Such reforms, including establishment, operation and strengthening, should always be family- and community-led based on experience and knowledge of family inclusion.

Prior to an application to the Children's Court

1. When it comes to partnering with families it is about identifying who and what 'family' is for every child in a respective case. A lot of the time, this can be people such as grandparents but, others, such as fathers, can slip through the cracks. There are a lot of avenues for connection, input and support for children that we miss out on and deprive a child of throughout the OOHC process.

2. Referral options and avenues to early intervention services require attention. There must be capacity in the system for self-referrals to early intervention services. Language needs to be addressed, including using friendly and culturally appropriate language which can ensure families feel safe and properly communicated with when being visited at their home. This means being family and kin focused, rather than just child focussed – children will benefit from a focus on all-of-family and community.

3. Family meetings should be extended to be run externally to DCJ. For example, DCJ could refer to Local Advisory Groups (LAGs) to run family meetings, or refer to elected community members, elected Elders or family. They can then agree on safety and actions and give that advice to DCJ. Elected community members and Elders should be remunerated for their time, respecting their expertise and acknowledging that their involvement often means revisiting their own trauma.

4. There needs to be greater family voice in group supervisions and safeguarding decision-making panels. There is a need to introduce a Court Practice Note that is similar to note 17 (used for post-removal) to allow the voice of parents and ACCOs to be given to the courts prior to any removal in the early intervention space.

5. We need to consider how we make a family and child safe within the context of current social issues like the housing crisis and DV. There could be a risk matrix of what else can be done, acknowledging that the black and white [restricted or limited] removal reason might be addressed in different ways, e.g., safety and staying with the perpetrator versus leaving the perpetrator in certain situations.

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6. To make family inclusion more broadly applied we need to create short simple statements as a model, such as a scorecard-type approach, of what family inclusion principles would look like for an organisation, a manager, and a practitioner. This is so people know what they/we are striving for and can measure efforts. For example, in relation to communication, using a range of already available resources, there could be a score about connecting existing resources, identifying gaps, looking at how existing resources are used for different people. The Family Inclusion Alliance should be instrumental in initiating development of some of those statements to be used by different organisations across systems.

7. Refer to the Aboriginal Community Controlled Mechanisms (ACCM) that sit within the DCJ Aboriginal Case Management Policy. For instance, Newcastle has a panel at the moment. We need to look at panels that can be self-referred, focused on the cultural needs of different families, and have access to services that are local, know the communities and know the families within the area, so it's more like a bridge to what is needed.

8. Practice expectations need to be grounded in reality. There is a disparity between hypothetical best practice and the reality of practice, workforce, and family situations. Sometimes, we have lost touch with the reality for families on the ground. There is no point talking about actions that aren't implementable or actionable, but if there are barriers like a lack of resources that need to be unblocked to make aspirations possible, we should do this.

Legal Proceedings commenced but children at home

9. There are important actions and steps to be taken under Section 13 (Care Act), the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. Actions speak louder than words and there are gaps in practice that impact the culture of the child and the families. Resources need to be applied, actions should be aligned with the principle, and support for this practice must be implemented.

10. As a demonstration of family inclusion, there should be a task description and how to do it, with an accountability record (even a tick box), e.g., "Did you call other members of the family?" as part of family finding and meeting placement principles. Simple statements that tell you if you are "doing" family inclusion. If you don't tick that box, there is a consequence that matters (i.e., you don't get paid) to ensure monitoring that everyone involved is following the steps and suggestions provided on how to better keep kids at home with families.

11. A diversion program is needed to stop kids getting into the courts in the first place.

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12. There needs to be a peer-led, co-designed service model that is statewide and consistent, rather than little pilot projects. It would provide integrated wrap-around services with automatic referrals to independent community-based support for families at risk of their kids being removed. This service would be independent of DCJ, so it can be trusted, tailored to particular family needs (taking account of, e.g., race, religion, disability), based in community, and not time limited. It would be relational, including families and led by families (not just nuclear families but wider family groups who are regarded as family by family). It would have a healing and therapeutic effect, dealing with grief and trauma, and include counselling for family, including broader family.

During court/ Just after removal

13. When working with Aboriginal families, external solutions should not be imposed. We must be mindful of how we take information into communities and give them information and provide a genuine opportunity and process to develop place-based solutions for how advocacy looks in each location and how it can engage with families early. This is recognition that, in those early stages, we are walking alongside families and then eventually come to stand behind families as their self-belief has been built-up so they can advocate for themselves.

14. Good things are happening now such as support for parents (FISH) and the Dubbo Aboriginal court list [Winha-nga-nha List] providing supports for families. Families must be engaged with earlier programs like these which should be in more than two places.

15. Create space in courts for Aboriginal Family Advocates to be better recognised and supported in taking an active role as an advocate for Aboriginal families.

16. Family inclusion needs to be meaningful. This requires attention to other elements of the system that need to change to be effective. Being invited to the table, being accepted and being part of that discussion is important.

17. The voice of the child or young person is important as well as the voice of the family because they are part of this network. When we are looking at the Care Act and how it talks about the safety, welfare and wellbeing of the child or young person it is very important that this remains the overarching principle, and we need to keep this in mind. This helps everyone to stay aligned, because with many voices and different roles there will not always be agreement about where to head, but this assists everyone to agree on how to work to achieve some outcomes.

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18. Healthy connections are important - not just immediate family but lifelong connections that are important to our children and young people. It might not mean they get to live with someone, but that those people will have a role to play in their life. These are key issues when talking about family advocates, family inclusion, and having family at the table, making those decisions and working with family.

19. Parents should have access from day one when they walk into court, to a family restoration clinic, where they can get information about what they should do to get their child back. This should be separate to having that conversation with a DCJ worker. The family restoration clinic can refer parents to services and give them information about services that may help them.

20. At the time the child is taken from a parent, there should be a Child Liaison Officer who is part of an independent panel with expertise to support the parent at the time the child is removed, including practical, emotional and social support. They would remain working with and available to that parent right up to the establishment phase, making sure the parent gets to court, taking them to court, staying with them in court, and taking them home. They would have access to some flexible funds, e.g., to purchase food and clothing for the parent, and to hold the parent in a safe space while they are going through that bewilderment period of having their child removed.

Permanently placed in out-of-home care

21. Processes for children in OOHC need to be led by family and not expect families to fit into systems that currently operate. The focus of case management needs to shift to restoration. This could include renaming foster carers as 'restoration carers', and case managers as 'restoration managers', so that restoration – children returning to their families and communities – is the focus of all case management for every single child in OOHC. We cannot achieve the goal of restoration until we have families around the table involved in all decision making and leading that process as true partners in the care of their children.

Governance

22. We need to start at the top when thinking about creating family inclusive governance for the sector. We often talk about practice and policy being an issue for the frontline and service delivery, but leadership is where family inclusion needs to change the most. It needs to be driven by leadership and create a culture of family inclusion. This means family inclusion concepts and ideas being built into strategic plans and mission statements, governance documents, constitutions, and similar governing documents that demonstrate commitments to family inclusion.

23. Across the sector we need to employ and pay people with lived experience and build this into our workforce development strategy across our organisations and across the context of the work we do – practice, policy, governance, leadership.

24. A separate family-led organisation, staffed by peer advocates, parents and family, for people involved with the system to connect with.

25. Family inclusion principles need to extend to systems outside the child protection system – for example, education, health, child and family – and demand collaboration with child protection and with DCJ. That is, doing their part too. This means not just when a child enters the care system or a mandatory report is made, but well before this when (for example) a child goes to school and may be disruptive, or when parents are working late, or a child or parent enters the health system. It is about all the services, structures, and institutions in place that equip those who are at home with children and families. It is about humanising a group of people who are demonised in society because they may not have the tools or coping mechanisms to provide what has been historically mandated as appropriate care for a child and putting things in place to support their caring role.

26. We need to write policies to support the work that we want to see on the ground and the framing and the assumptions that we want to see from service providers across government and non-government organisations. Family inclusion starts with the base premise or paradigm of integrating empathy in practice – meeting families where they are at. This encompasses everyone or anybody who could be family to the child in question and including support services to address identified needs from the get-go.

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