

# PARENT PEER SUPPORT PROJECT



## FROM LITTLE THINGS BIG THINGS ARE COMING

FINAL REPORT OF THE PARENT PEER SUPPORT PROJECT 2020

Newcastle Law  
School

Family Inclusion  
Strategies in the  
Hunter Inc.

Life Without  
Barriers

NSW Law and  
Justice  
Foundation

## Project Partners:



**WE  
LIFE WITHOUT BARRIERS  
VE**

## Funded by:



**LAW AND JUSTICE  
FOUNDATION**

**OF NEW  
SOUTH WALES**

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## Glossary of Abbreviations

<b>DCJ</b>	NSW Department of Communities and Justice. Formerly Family and Community Services (FACS), Department of Community Services (DOCS). Also referred to as “the Department”.
<b>FISH</b>	Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter – One of the three project partners who developed and applied for funding for the project and who played a major role in running the project.
<b>LWB</b>	Life Without Barriers – a non-government agency providing child and family services. One of the three project partners who developed and applied for funding and helped to run the project.
<b>NLS</b>	Newcastle Law School, the University of Newcastle (UoN) – the grant holder, administrator, employer, and auspice agency; one of the three project partners who developed and applied for funding and helped to run the project.
<b>PPSP</b>	Parent Peer Support Project, or ‘the project’.

# Acknowledgements



The Parent Peer Support Project (PPSP) was the result of hard work by many partners and collaborators, well beyond the project partner organisations.

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Thanks to Port Stephens Family Support, Family Support Newcastle, Relationships Australia and the Samaritans who provided us with venues for our information workshops and our morning tea groups. The Samaritans continue to provide FISH with a venue to run morning teas, which ensures parents in the Hunter Valley with children in care or who fear child removal continue to support each other.

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Chrissy McYoung, from Hairy Phish Designs and also a social work student, designed the information resources and the project brochure. Much of the work Chrissy did was voluntary and was of enormous importance to the project's success.



We would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which this work took place - the Awabakal people. We pay our respects to their elders, past, present and emerging.

# Executive Summary



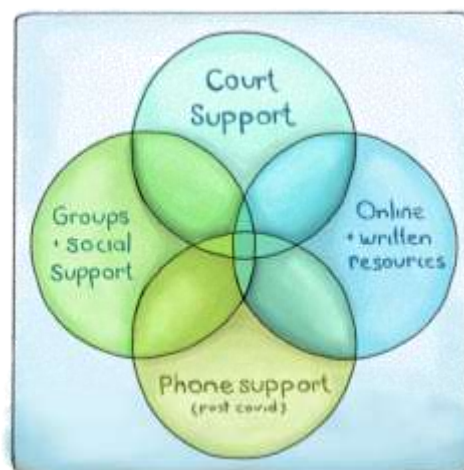
Support and help for parents and family is a fundamental children's right. Yet, parents and family in the Australian child protection system continue to be excluded, causing untold grief, loss and trauma to their children. Family inclusive innovations are needed to empower parents and family to participate in the processes that profoundly affect them and their children. Peer support and advocacy is a family inclusive innovation and an important part of making sure parents and family can participate in their children's lives. There is growing evidence that supports the effectiveness of peer initiatives.

In early 2014, community work began in the Hunter Valley of NSW to build family inclusion, including a greater role for parents and family themselves to make a positive difference. A parent-led organisation, Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter (FISH), was established. Along with allies in the community, FISH has been publicly advocating for initiatives that are family inclusive and parent and family led, which includes peer support and advocacy.

This report provides background information, a brief review of the context and supporting literature. It then describes the development and implementation of the Parent Peer Support Project (PPSP) in Newcastle during 2019 and 2020. The PPSP was run by project partners FISH, Life Without Barriers (LWB) and the University of Newcastle Law School (NLS) It was funded by the NSW Law and Justice Foundation. It was trialled for a year, survived COVID-19 disruptions and was completed in October 2020. With very limited resources, the project successfully implemented three, then four service elements.

The PPSP team was staffed by a Project Coordinator and a team of Parent Partners – parents with lived experience of child removal and experience of successfully navigating their child protection system. Parents received emotional support, companionship and information. Many were also referred to other support services including those provided by FISH, such as, morning teas. Data collected during the project showed that over 300 people – the vast majority being parents – were helped by the PPSP in court, in group processes, on the phone and through access to information resources developed by parents for parents. Feedback from parents, court users and other stakeholders has been positive. Similarly, the project provided some new experiences and life-changing opportunities for Parent Partners.

We learned a great deal while the project was being implemented, including ideas for peer recruitment, the importance of trauma-informed processes and supportive supervision, and the value of parent and family leadership to bring about change in the interests of children. The project has also demonstrated that peer parents with lived experience of child removal can work alongside other professionals in the child protection system. Peer work needs to continue, integrating what we have learned and complemented with ongoing research and evaluation.



# From little things ..

## The Back Story to the PPSP



In early 2014, a group of Newcastle child and family welfare workers from a range of organisations met in a local café to discuss the experiences of parents and family in the child protection system. Across our organisations, we regularly saw parents and family excluded from children's lives and disrespected and stigmatised. We worried about the impact on their children. We saw growing numbers of children in care and, despite government policy that restoration was the first preference of the care system, we rarely saw restoration happen. We knew from years of working in the system that the children we worked with wanted to have close relationships with their family and many wanted to return home.

We decided to hold an event where practitioners could hear from parents themselves about what it was like to work with us – workers in the system (Cocks, 2014). From this event, parents formed collaborative relationships with organisers to continue to amplify the voices of parents and family and promote family inclusion. A new organisation was set up – Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter Inc. (FISH), which is now majority-led by parents and family with lived experience of child removal and placement. FISH advocates for parents and family who are often publicly vilified and left unsupported after their children are removed from their care. FISH has been steadfast in its focus on promoting the rights of children to know and live with their families and not to be removed or distanced from family except in compelling circumstances.

FISH has done many things since 2014 which have led to the development of the Parent Peer Support Project (PPSP). Those activities included organising more events, developing a website, participating in research, training staff and carers and directly helping parents and family to negotiate the child protection system through peer support and advocacy.

From March 2015 to October 2016, a group of researchers and practitioners completed a research project that explored parents' perspectives of having children removed and having children in care (Ross, et al., 2017). FISH collaborated with the University of Newcastle and Life Without Barriers to support this research. Among other findings, the research found that parents experienced court and other child protection processes as traumatic, isolating and unhelpful. It also found that parents experiencing child protection intervention and child removal wanted to connect with and learn from other parents and family who knew what it was like.

In 2016, the then FISH President was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to explore family inclusive initiatives in the international context. Peer support and advocacy in child protection emerged as a standout initiative from that project and as a contributor to family inclusion that is in the interests of children (Cocks, 2018, 2019, in press).

Throughout its history, FISH has partnered with many local agencies and individuals, including government agencies. A key strength and skill of FISH leaders has been to form respectful, ongoing relationships with stakeholders while challenging child protection policy and practice. This strong network of partnerships enabled FISH to form a coalition with two other key organisations (Life Without Barriers and the Newcastle Law School) and many other supportive organisations and individuals to apply for funding from the NSW Law and Justice Foundation to develop and run a parent peer support trial in the Newcastle area.





## About the Three Partner Organisations

Parents and family with children in the child protection system are stigmatised and poorly understood. Despite evidence to the contrary, they are portrayed as uniformly abusive and uncaring of their children, and as individuals who are entirely to blame for their circumstances and unable to change or play a positive role in their children's lives. It takes courage, hard work and leadership to challenge those stereotypes and false beliefs, and to disrupt the system with innovative initiatives like peer work.

In 2018, the following three organisations worked together to apply for funding from the NSW Law and Justice Foundation to develop and run the PPSP.

### Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter (FISH)<sup>1</sup>

was established in 2014. It is a small and mostly voluntary organisation made up of parents and family with lived experience of the child protection system and professionals who have worked in the system for many years. Throughout its history, FISH has been substantially parent and family led and at the time of the PPSP, 70% of its board was made up of people with lived experience. FISH is first and foremost a children's rights organisation and has successfully and consistently challenged the idea that children's needs and rights are distinct and separate from those of their families and communities. FISH is an active part of national and international networks that promote parent and family peer advocacy.

FISH charges fees for training and consultancy services to agencies. The fees are used to pay parent and family leaders for their unique expertise, as well as its services with and for parents and family in the community. FISH has been running a parent and family support morning tea in Newcastle for several years and is one of the first support groups in Australia that is run solely by parents and family.

### Life Without Barriers (LWB)<sup>2</sup>

was established in Newcastle in 1994. It is one of the largest providers of child, youth and family services in Australia. In 2016, in partnership with Cornell University in New York, LWB began implementing the evidence-based Children and Residential Experiences (CARE) practice model (Holden, 2009), which requires a *family involved* approach to the care of children. Going beyond conventional understandings of family engagement, CARE requires LWB staff and carers to actively partner with and include family because this is ethical, supported by the evidence and what children need. As part of implementing CARE, LWB has partnered with FISH and the Newcastle Law School on numerous occasions including participating in the research team for the parent perspectives research project discussed above (Ross et al., 2017), and continuing to work on family inclusive research and practice initiatives.

<sup>1</sup> More information about FISH can be found at [www.finclusionh.org](http://www.finclusionh.org)

<sup>2</sup> More information about LWB and the CARE model can be found at [www.lwb.org.au](http://www.lwb.org.au)

## Newcastle Law School

is part of the University of Newcastle. It delivers innovative research and undertakes collaborative research partnerships with business, industry, and government in our region, across the nation and internationally. This is underpinned by a focus on clinical legal education and evidence-based law. Research strengths include applied law and justice and justice innovation, including in the child welfare sector. The Law School offered a subject, Child Law, from 2000 to 2018 to law and social work students that promoted interdisciplinary practice in children's legal settings.<sup>3</sup> Two members of the research team who conducted the parents' perspectives research (Ross et al., 2017) were the lecturers for Child Law.<sup>4</sup>

As part of the then Faculty of Business and Law, the Law School was the auspice for the Parent Peer Support Project, showcasing its capacity to collaborate with industry partners, people with lived experience and advocacy groups, including the child welfare sector.

## The Hunter Valley and NSW



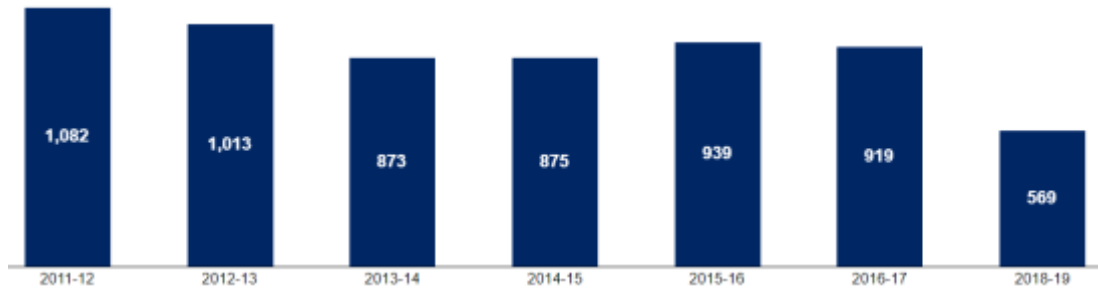
The Hunter Valley has relatively high numbers of children in care. In June 2019, there were 2,863 children in statutory care in the Hunter New England Region and 14,339 children in statutory care in the state. Hunter Valley data was not available for children in non-statutory care – which includes children in temporary care arrangements – many of whom may go on to statutory care. The total number of children in NSW in statutory and non-statutory out-of-home-care in 2018-19 was 16,884, including 6,754 Aboriginal children. This means that 40% of the total number of children in care in NSW are Aboriginal.<sup>5</sup> The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care is around eleven times that of other Australian children (AIHW, 2020), a disproportionate trend that has been increasing for some years (Lewis & Weston, 2019).

Restoration numbers – children returning home to their families – are trending downwards despite policy and practice efforts to the contrary. Data from the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) states that during 2018-19, a total of 569 children returned home from care in NSW, with an overall downward trend since 2011 (see). Hunter Valley restoration data was not available.

<sup>3</sup> As an elective for law students and a directed elective (BSW requirement) for third year social work students. For social work students it was replaced in 2019 with a less specific and social science-related legal course. It has continued as a law elective since 2019.

<sup>4</sup> The lead researcher/law lecturer taught the course 2004-2019. The other member taught 2016-2018.

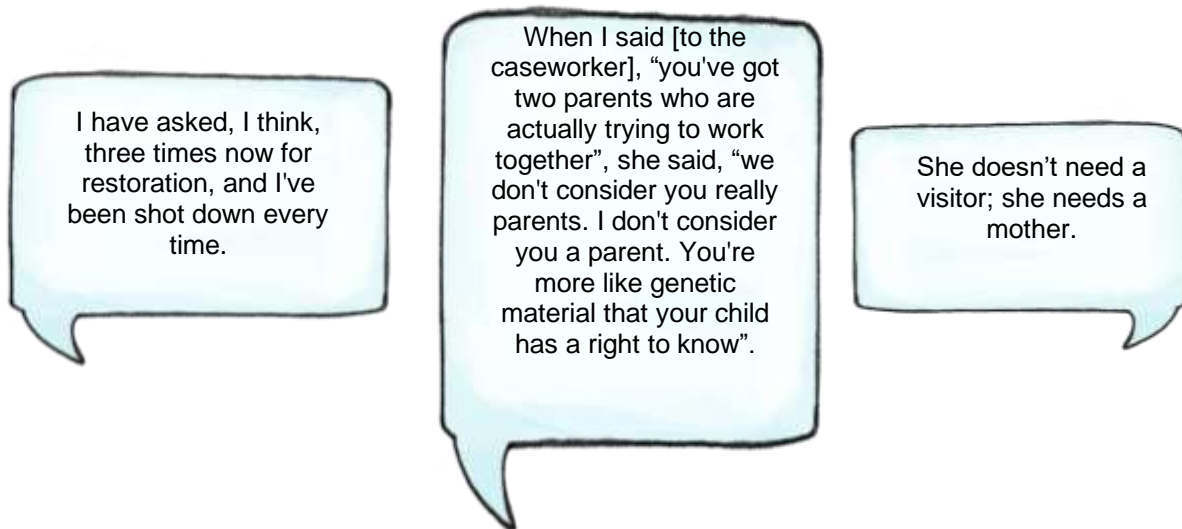
<sup>5</sup> Definitions of out-of-home care in NSW have changed in 2017/18 to exclude children on guardianship orders. This makes it difficult to compare current data with data from prior to 2017/18. Data on restoration may be impacted by a range of factors including entries to care. For more information about all Australian jurisdictional data on child protection and out-home-care see the annually produced *Child Protection Australia* Report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare at: [www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2018-19/contents/summary](http://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2018-19/contents/summary).



**Figure 1: Children and young people restored to parents' care (NSW, 2011-2019) <sup>6</sup>**

Other research evidence also suggests that NSW restoration rates are low. For example, a study of newborn babies' entries to care in NSW found a restoration rate as low as 6.6% over an 8-year period (Marsh et al., 2017). Restoration rates in other parts of Australia (not including NSW) for all children are around 25% and even lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at 19% (AIHW, 2020).

The parent perspectives research conducted in the Hunter Valley (Ross et al., 2017) found parents with children in care face enormous challenges when they try to participate in court, legal and other child protection processes. Parents lacked support to have their voices heard. They found themselves swept along in proceedings which did not have a focus on restoration. They told researchers that their identities as parents were undermined through child protection practices and processes and they experienced harsh and excluding treatment;



<sup>6</sup> NSW Department of Communities and Justice, 2020.

Parents found court processes confusing, challenging and traumatic;

The biggest challenges would have been sitting there and getting told what a horrible person you are. It's not a nice feeling. It makes you feel so little and you just want to crawl under a rock and not be there.

I was sitting there, and I was watching more and more distraught parents, some actually being escorted out by security because they were so unreasonable and so emotional that they were asked to leave the courthouse. I'm like, "where's their fair representation? Where's their compassion?" There was none of that.

It's like being raped again, if that's the easy way to put it. It's like being raped again.

When parents did have support in court, it was usually from family or friends and they found it helpful. However, most parents felt isolated, alone and unheard;

They don't really tell you that you can take support... they don't even really acknowledge that you're in the room. I mean, they'll ask and the judge will say "Is the mother present?" But she doesn't look at you. They just sit there and go. "okay, good".

High rates of children in care, disproportionate rates of Aboriginal children in care and low rates of restoration in NSW combined with the experiences of Hunter Valley parents suggested an urgent need for innovative solutions like peer work. Other contextual features suggested that the Hunter Valley would make a good site to trial peer work. FISH and the partner organisations had established good relationships and connections with parents and family in the area. FISH had a growing social media presence which would enable easier and accessible promotional and recruitment activities. Key leaders were working in all three partner organisations and could drive the implementation process and invite collaboration from others. The Churchill Fellowship project (Cocks, 2018, 2019) also generated key learnings that could guide planning and implementation activities.



# Learning from Evidence

## about Peer Support and Advocacy



While parent and family peer support and advocacy in child protection is new to Australia, it has a growing evidence base elsewhere, especially in the USA. What follows is a very brief summary of the need and the evidence with an Australian focus.<sup>7</sup> One of the biggest reasons for promoting parent and family support and advocacy is the profound power imbalances in the child protection system, and the well documented poor experiences of parents and family (Davis, 2019; Harries, 2008; Ross, et al., 2017, 2017b). Almost all families who lose children to care are poor (Bennett, et al., 2020; Bywaters, et al., 2014) and there is little or no practice response offered by the child protection system that relates to poverty (Bennett et al., 2020; Morris, et al., 2018). Parental engagement in child protection processes are crucial to drive better outcomes for children yet engagement remains poor (Hinton, 2018; Ross et al., 2017; Smith & Donovan, 2003). Relational practice frameworks in Australia, while welcome, have not yet been shown to effectively engage parents and family and to prevent high rates of children in care (Cocks, 2019; Finan, et al., 2018). Parents who lose their children to care continue to identify strongly as parents and try to exercise a parenting role even though they find the role challenging (Broadhurst & Mason, 2014; Ross et al., 2017). Even highly traumatised parents can and do go on to successfully parent children. They rely primarily on their own personal resources and social support networks to do so, rather than on professional help or therapies (Broadhurst & Mason, 2014).

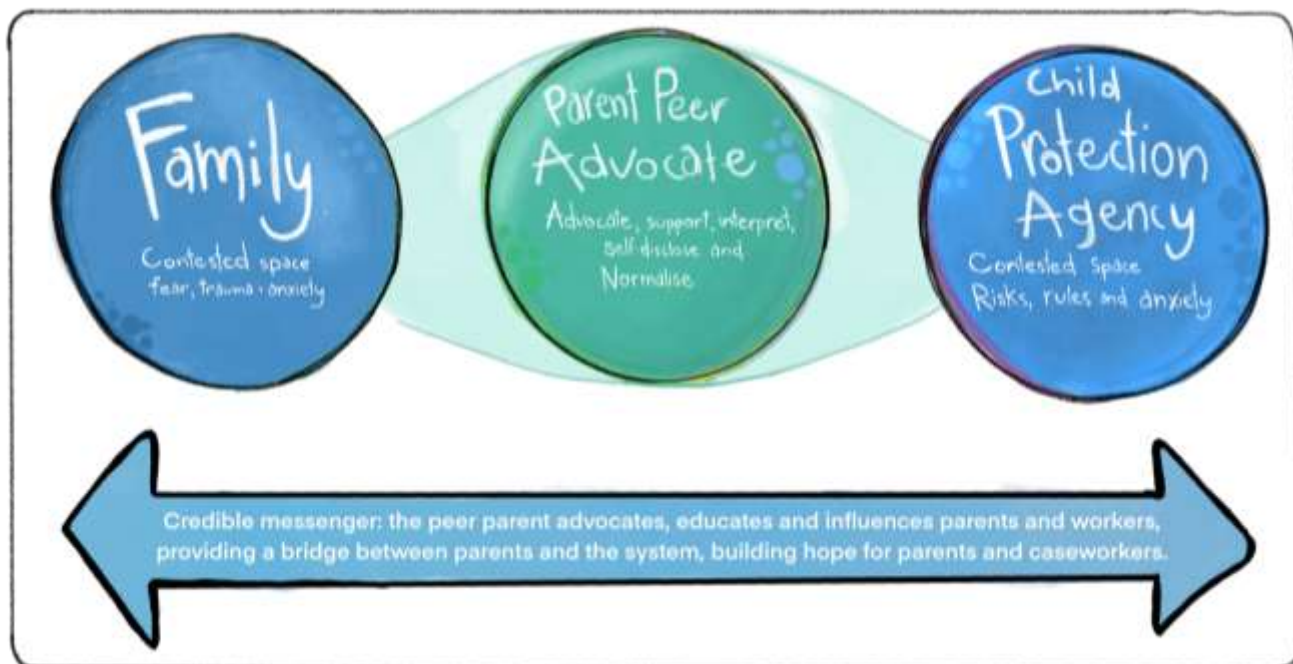
Peer parent and family advocacy has the potential to address the underlying causes of child removal and to increase participation in child protection processes that is in the interests of children. There is evidence linking peer advocacy and support to restoration (Berrick, et al., 2011) and to family engagement (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). A recent, large scale study in New York City, involving 20,000 children, linked restoration and to shorter stays in care to a multi-disciplinary approach that included peer advocates (Gerber, et al., 2019).

The recent *Family is Culture Report* in NSW (Davis, 2019) recommended that a Child Protection Advocacy Service for Aboriginal families be established to give advice to and advocate for families involved in the child protection system. The report recommended the service be informed by the methods of Grandmothers Against Removals NSW (GMAR NSW), a group of Aboriginal grandmothers with lived experience. The recommendation was part of a set of strategies to drive down child removals and ensure children remain with family.

Peer parent and family advocacy may drive relationship-based practice. It is very challenging, and often unrealistic, for child protection caseworkers to build trusting relationships in a power-laden environment where parents and children fear removal. Parent and family peers can use their shared experience to build relationships and support families to focus on themselves and the needs of their children. They can also help caseworkers to empathise with the lived experience of parents and family. Figure 2 below describes how peer support and advocacy and lived experience can enable both parents and statutory workers to navigate fear, anxiety and distrust, to build child-focused relationships.

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<sup>7</sup> For a more comprehensive review of the international literature on parent and family support and advocacy to promote participation, refer to [Better Care Network and IPAN](#) (2020).



**Figure 2: Peer parent and family advocacy and support contributing to better relationships**

There are also benefits for parent and family peers themselves, such as, a strong sense of job satisfaction in helping others, developing a career path and improved confidence. Studies have also demonstrated the importance of strong and supportive supervision for parent peers (Berrick et al., 2011; Lalayants, 2019).

Peer parent and family advocacy is consistent with the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) (UN, 1989). The CRC clearly states that children have a right to be cared for by their parents and for their parents and other family to be helped and supported. If a child cannot live with their family, they continue to have a right to know them and identify with them and for them to be helped in their roles. There is good evidence that children themselves want relationships with their families and to return home whenever possible (Mackillop Family Services, 2020; Mendes, et al., 2020).

# Project Design



## Project aim

Support, empower and educate parents who have children subject to care applications in the Broadmeadow Children's Court or who are at risk of facing such proceedings to participate in legal, child protection and out of home care

Prior to receiving the grant from the NSW Law and Justice Foundation, FISH developed a program logic which is summarised in figure 3.

We started with the outcomes that we wanted to achieve and identified activities and resources we needed to achieve those outcomes. Parent participation was a key element because it has been linked to better outcomes in research and literature, and it has also led to improved outcomes in the lives of FISH parent leaders and their children.



**Figure 3: Summary of program logic**

The program logic integrated the limited resources FISH expected to have available. Three activity elements were identified and a fourth was added part way through the project – phone-based peer support – when COVID-19 forced the Children's Court to operate virtually between March and August 2020.

## Project Activity Elements

While distinct from each other, the four elements are all peer services (See figure 4). By operating three, then four elements, the project demonstrated that peers can play a variety of roles in the child protection system.

**1. Court Support.** This took place at Broadmeadow Children's Court on Thursdays when care matters are regularly before the court. Court support was also occasionally requested by parents or their supporters on different days for other court-related processes, such as, conferences or hearings. This was provided whenever possible.

**2. Groups/social support.** We originally planned to offer semi-structured group information sessions to parents. They were attempted in three locations and, although there was some interest, overall, the information sessions were not well attended. The team then moved to a less structured approach, leveraging from an existing FISH support group co-organised and facilitated by Parent Partners.

**3. Information resources.** The project developed eight information resources about key processes and concepts in child protection proceedings. Parent Partners used their own lived experience to reflect on what information they felt would have helped them and research findings were also considered. The resources were modified in response to feedback received from parents as the project progressed.

**4. Phone peer support.** This commenced in May 2020 following the closure of the Children's Court due to COVID-19. It included Parent Partners responding to parents and family members who contacted FISH and the PPSP via a free-call phone number established for this project and via Facebook and email.

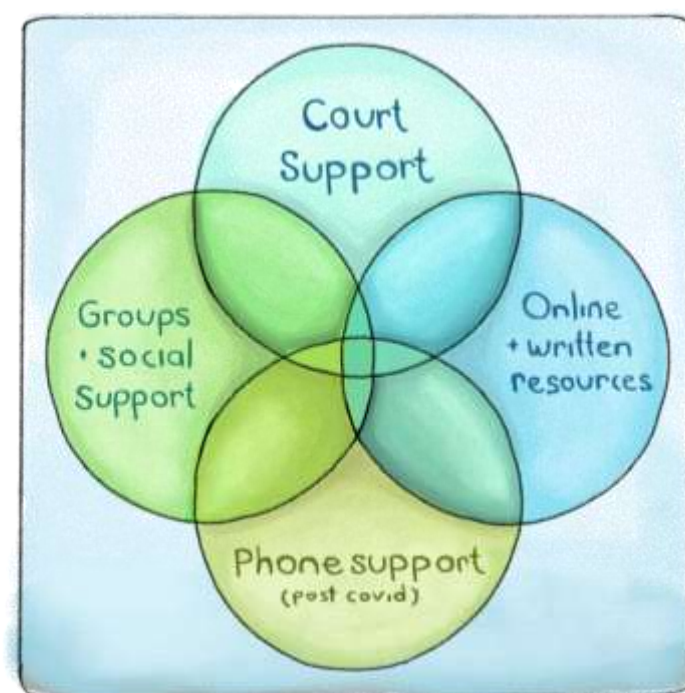


Figure 4: Summary of project elements



## Service Intensity and Other Key Design Characteristics

The PPSP received a total of \$49,990 in funding from the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW<sup>8</sup>. We anticipated that the project would run for around six months and, while the duration was extended when COVID-19 prevented in person court attendance, the funding amount did not allow for intensive or ongoing support or advocacy to be offered to parents beyond the key service elements that were described above.

Other design characteristics were:

**A direct pathway to peer support provided by parents and family with no referral or mediating services.** We knew from research and the lived experience of FISH parent leaders that it was difficult for parents to overcome entry barriers to services they needed. Wait lists were long and program guidelines were often prohibitive with strict age limits and other criteria. Other than what we could do within our resource limitations, there were no barriers to parents and family getting support from a Parent Partner.

**Parent Partners did not write case notes or reports on their interactions with parents,** apart from noting some very basic, non-identifying information for project evaluation. This is an intentional way to help build trust with parents. It was important for parents to know that Parent Partners did not play a role in surveillance or assessment, and that there was no documenting of words or actions of parents and family that could be used elsewhere, such as, formal assessments or evidence. This is characteristic of peer work elsewhere, as described in Cocks (2018); “Unlike other child welfare staff, peer workers do not take notes or gather evidence. They are a safe source of emotional and practical support that directly addresses barriers to family engagement that caseworkers struggle to overcome” (p. 7).

**Parent Partners worked in pairs whenever possible** when working at court and in group processes. This teamwork approach allowed Parent Partners to learn from and support each other, to support or relieve each other in difficult situations, and to have options to select the most appropriate Parent Partner for a parent.

**Parent Partners did not insist on spending time with parents.** They approached parents in court to introduce themselves and offer support. If parents did not want to interact with them, the Parent Partners respected their decision. Parents were always told they could change their mind and they did this from time to time.

**Parent Partners participated in supervision and support in both individual and group processes** throughout the life of the project. This is discussed in more detail later in this report. The importance of supportive supervision for peer work cannot be overstated.

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*Once they realise [we are another parent] it is a bit of a relief I think, to be able to talk to someone who's not their solicitor, not their caseworker, not someone involved in their case that could potentially say something that might go against them.*  
(Parent Partner, focus group)

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<sup>8</sup> For information about the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW go to: [www.lawfoundation.net.au](http://www.lawfoundation.net.au)

## Governance

The PPSP had formal auspice from the Newcastle Law School and all three partner organisations formed the project management team. The Law School was the formal auspice because of its infrastructure to support employment of parent partners, its track record in research on children’s participation and rights in legal processes and its leadership in developing restorative practice in a child protection context (Ross 2013, 2016, 2017, 2018; Ross & Anderson, 2018). The governance of the project is described in Figure 5.

### Project Management Team

The University of Newcastle Law School employed all members of the project team – the Project Coordinator and Parent Partners. The project and the staff team were managed by a small project management team made up of representatives from each of the partner organisations – the Newcastle Law School, FISH, and Life Without Barriers. The Project Coordinator was also part of the project management team. The Coordinator received supervision from a member of the management team.

### Steering Committee

The PPSP received advice and support from a broad-based Steering Committee made up of a range of stakeholders in the community (see Appendix A). The role of this group was not to make decisions or provide overall leadership – this remained with the project partner organisations. However, the Steering Committee was central to the project in identifying and mitigating risks, in promoting the project, in providing encouragement and support to the project management team and in generating discussion and ideas in order to solve problems as they arose.



Figure 5: Governance of the PPSP

For example, Steering Committee members helped search for potential Parent Partners and encouraged them to apply. This included a recommendation from the Children’s Court Magistrate.

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*The Magistrate recommended me as a Parent Partner for a new project piloting in the Broadmeadow Children’s Court, stating that I was an “outstanding candidate”. This did worlds for my confidence and sense of self.  
(Parent Partner, personal communication)*

Another example of support provided came from the Executive District Director responsible for the Hunter Valley, in DCJ. When the project management team encountered difficulties in obtaining reference checks for Parent Partner applicants from DCJ caseworkers, the Director paved the way for an easing of policy, to enable references to be collected.

# The Planning

## Getting Ready to Trial Parents as Peers



An overview of the trajectory of the project's development and implementation is provided in Figure 6.

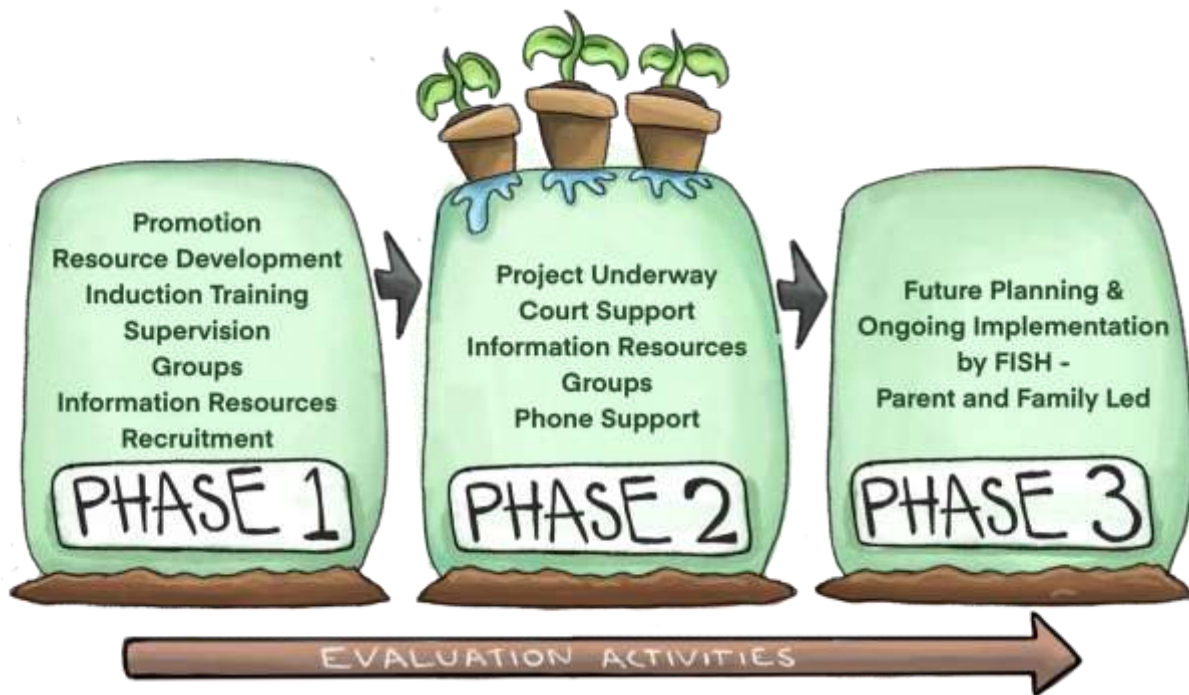


Figure 6: Project development trajectory

## Project Promotion

This was the first time in Australia that a team of parents with lived experience of child removal had been employed and paid to bring their peer knowledge and skills alongside other care and protection professionals, such as, lawyers and caseworkers. Prior to implementation, the role of peers needed to be carefully discussed with key stakeholders in the sector in order to build acceptance and partnerships.

This included the Children's Court Magistrate and her team, leaders and solicitors from NSW Legal Aid, the NSW Aboriginal Legal Service and the private legal sector. Agencies and individuals from the government and non-government child and family welfare sector were all supportive. For example, an experienced solicitor from Life Without Barriers provided legal advice on resources produced by the project and NSW Legal Aid provided legal approval.

Well before the project commenced, FISH had developed a local profile and was regularly delivering workshops and participating in other events in the local community. As the project was being planned, FISH and other project management team members attended interagency meetings and gatherings at the Children's Court to explain the project and to listen to concerns. The reception to the project was mostly positive. There were some stakeholders who worried that peer parents in court may add to the elevated emotions and distress that family members were already feeling and make it even harder for them to participate effectively. Other stakeholders were concerned about recruitment to peer roles and how we would ensure that peers did not have current child protection proceedings. Those conversations strengthened project planning and development by bringing issues to the surface and meant the project management team could properly consider and address concerns and potential impediments.

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*I have to say, I started off very reluctant as I didn't know how it would impact, having a parent support group at court – would it heighten the parents, inspire the parents, or do something else? – I think, for me, there was a little bit of fear of the unknown... I am so happy I was wrong.*  
(Solicitor, interview)

Promotion of the PPSP in the planning phase also aimed to identify potential parents with lived experience to be Parent Partners and form the project team. Agency staff and court users were asked to think about parents they had worked with and to tell them about the opportunity to work as a peer. This generated several applications.

As the project start date approached, the newly formed team worked on a project brochure which was distributed in hard and electronic versions throughout the local sector and in the Children's Court (see Appendix D). The brochure was developed with the help of *Hairy Phish*<sup>9</sup> and featured photographs of the then newly appointed Parent Partners. Various key moments in the project's development were promoted by FISH on social media and this continued through all phases of the project's development and implementation.

## Recruitment

We anticipated that recruiting for peer staff in a child protection setting would be a challenge. As it turned out, the role of FISH was crucial; as a well-regarded parent and family led organisation. Two of the five Parent Partner jobs were filled by existing FISH parent leaders and three others were filled by parents who had participated in FISH events and were familiar with FISH.

## Project Coordinator

The Project Coordinator was the first PPSP recruit and commenced in April 2019. She was an experienced child protection social worker and educator with strong links to FISH and to the family inclusion movement. While she did not have lived experience of the child protection system as a parent or family member, she did have experience as a family inclusive foster carer who, along with her partner, had provided ongoing weekend and short break care to a group of siblings who were otherwise at risk of entering the care system.

One of her first tasks was to write job descriptions and lead recruitment of the project team.

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<sup>9</sup> Chrissy McYoung at Hairy Phish provided graphic design for the project's information resources and the brochure. More information about Hairy Phish Designs can be found at: <https://www.facebook.com/hairyphish/>

## Job Descriptions

The position descriptions for Parent Partners and Project Coordinator are provided in Appendix B. The role title of *Parent Partner* was eventually decided upon after consideration of other possibilities including parent peer worker, parent ally and parent advocate. The Steering Committee wanted to prevent role confusion with lawyers which they worried may lead to parent peers providing advice that conflicted with legal advice. This raised concerns about ensuring the lawyer-client relationship would not be compromised by the peer role, which led to inclusion of a requirement that parent peers could not participate in lawyer-client conversations unless explicitly allowed by the lawyer and the parent. The following statement was inserted into the position description to deal with this concern. The issue did not arise in practice at any time in the project.

Parent Partners may be present at times when parents talk to their lawyers to provide emotional support, with the lawyer's consent. The Parent Partner role cannot participate in conversations or any interactions between parents, family members and lawyers unless invited to by both the parent and the lawyer, or speak or communicate in any way on behalf of parents or family members to either the lawyer or the Court, unless invited to by the lawyer or the Court. Parent Partners will be required to sign a commitment to adhere to this requirement when they are appointed and to participate in training and supervision to support how they work in the role.  
(Parent Partner Position Description, see Appendix B)

The key selection criterion was lived experience of child removal because of child protection concerns. There was discussion about whether to require experience of restoration and it was eventually decided that this would not apply. This ensured that good applicants would not be precluded because their children had not been returned and because the restoration rates in New South Wales were too low to have this requirement.

Parent Partners were required to have no current matters before the court and a low likelihood that this would occur. Although this was generally consistent with the requirement that any child protection concerns had been resolved for at least a year, it also meant that applicants with no child protection concerns, but who did have matters before the court, such as post-restoration supervision orders, could not be considered.

## Recruitment Activities

Rather than advertising via job seeking websites or newspapers, the project management team promoted the project and roles using community relationships, word of mouth, social media and attendance at various interagency and court user forums. Steering Committee members distributed flyers among their networks and in their workplaces and actively sought out potential candidates. See one example of a recruitment flyer in Appendix C.

The Project Coordinator and FISH convened an information session/morning tea at Broadmeadow Children's Court and invited potential applicants to attend and ask questions. Ten parents with lived experience attended and there was general discussion about the PPSP in a relaxed and friendly setting. The session helped ensure that some applicants who may not be successful (because of current court proceedings, for example) did not go through the application process unnecessarily. It also highlighted to the project management team that there were potentially many peer workers in the community and built our confidence in filling the roles. Several people who attended the session decided to proceed with an application.

In total, fifteen people enquired about the Parent Partner roles. The project management team had planned to appoint up to three Parent Partners and we were delighted with the level of interest. In consultation with the Project Coordinator, it was agreed that all applicants assessed as suitable by the panel during selection activities would be offered employment. This not only contributed to a more robust team but, ultimately, helped develop parent and family leadership more broadly in the community.

## Selection Activities

All applicants were required to submit a written application. The Project Coordinator and a member of the project management team offered support if needed. Seven written applications were received. All applicants were required to provide two references including a reference from a caseworker or someone else at DCJ who could verify that child protection concerns had been resolved for at least a year and that no matters were currently before the court.

After reviewing the written applications, the panel determined that all applicants met the minimum criteria and proceeded to interview. There was a set of standard questions, which were provided to applicants in advance, however, the panel kept the discussion informal and relaxed. Applicants were encouraged to ask questions as well as answer them. The requirement to do probity and reference checking was discussed and applicants provided information openly and honestly about any issues that may emerge during the checks, including the reasons their children had been removed.

Following the interviews, the panel moved on to checking references and initially encountered some difficulties. In consultation with the Steering Committee, it had been agreed that verification would be sought from DCJ that there were no recent or current child protection concerns. However, DCJ caseworkers were restrained by departmental policy from providing references, even when provided with written consent from applicants. This was resolved when the DCJ Executive District Director, a member of the Steering Committee, intervened and informed caseworkers that the policy would not apply in this case. This timely intervention enabled references to proceed.

Overall, referee reports were positive and supportive from both DCJ caseworkers and other referees. Below are two edited quotes obtained from referee reports and included in our recruitment notes.

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*[Applicant] is a gentle but firm communicator. She is a great listener. She is lovely and warm with other parents and with children. She seeks clarification when needed. I think [applicant] is ideally suited to provide emotional support to parents in crisis. (Parent Partner referee)*

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*[Applicant] is very organised. She has wanted to get into this work and is supportive and encouraging. She thinks things through. Even though the system let her down she was very positive to work with. She is one of the nicest people I have met in my work. (Parent Partner referee)*

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## Probity Requirements

Applicants for Parent Partner roles were required to undergo the same probity checks that are common for employment in the care and protection sector. In order to be rigorous and learn from an experienced agency, the Life Without Barriers probity checking policy was applied. This included a national criminal record check and the NSW Working with Children Check (WWCC)<sup>10</sup>. It was also agreed in advance by the project management team, in consultation with the Steering Committee, that applicants would be automatically excluded if the national criminal record check revealed they had committed serious offences against children or other serious violent offences. A WWCC bar would have also excluded employment.

None of the successful applicants' checks revealed records of concern. Employing agencies requiring these checks often ask applicants to pay. In this case, FISH paid, and the Project Coordinator provided practical support for preparation.

## Appointment

All Parent Partner roles were filled on a casual basis in August 2019 and paid based on the University's non-academic award. The Project Coordinator was employed for 11 hours per week on a temporary part-time basis. The Parent Partner roles commenced with around 24 hours of training and induction activities delivered flexibly over a two-week period.

## Initial Training, Induction and Team Building

Some Parent Partners had recent or current work experience and others had very little work experience. As peers in the child protection system, they were doing something very new and there were few pre-existing training materials to draw upon. The Project Coordinator drew from other the learnings from other sectors where there is existing peer work, such as, mental health and alcohol and other drugs, from her own extensive knowledge of the child protection system, from literature (such as, Cocks, 2018) and group and teamwork theories.

The training and induction included:

- Building cohesive and supportive relationships within the team
- Professional relationships and boundaries
- Self-care and secondary trauma
- Skills practice especially listening and interpersonal skills
- What is peer work and how it helps?
- Relationships with other stakeholders
- Professional conduct (including conduct on social media)
- Working ethically
- Legal requirements and issues
- Administration issues such as the University's computer system and timesheets

<sup>10</sup> The NSW Working With Children Check is required for all child-related employment in NSW including voluntary work, as defined by the Child Protection (Working with Children) Act 2012. For more information about who is required to get the check visit:

<https://www.kidsguardian.nsw.gov.au/child-safe-organisations/working-with-children-check/employer/who-needs-a-working-with-children-check>

During training, the team shared meals together and with the broader project management team, networked and planned for court peer support, and planned for group processes. Attendance to dynamics and process in the team was important and was done intentionally to support relationship building among each other and with the project management team.

## **Induction Meeting with the Children's Court**

The project team (Project Coordinator and Parent Partners) met with the Magistrate and other court staff (including security staff, DCJ court staff and registry staff) to get to know one another and welcome the team. After introductions, the team shared their enthusiasm for the project and planned for the first day in court. This helped Parent Partners transition into their new roles and prepare to enter the Children's Court building for the first time as peers providing support, and not as parents of children subject to current proceedings.

## **Resource Development**

At the same time as Parent Partners were being recruited, trained and inducted, they started work with the Project Coordinator and the project management team on development of the various information resources for other parents and family.



# The Team

## Parent Partners and Project Coordinator



The project team was initially made up of the Project Coordinator and five Parent Partners, all of whom were women. One Parent Partner withdrew after completing one court support session in order to manage other work and family commitments. The remaining four Parent Partners remained with the project for the duration.

All team members had a range of experiences which led them to their roles. The Parent Partners had experienced a mix of life experiences that led to their children being removed, including, family violence and substance misuse. Each of the parents felt they had needed to make changes in their lives at the time of removal but did not necessarily feel their children should have been removed. All the Parent Partners had received useful help from at least some services, and all had formed constructive relationships with at least one DCJ caseworker. All had fought hard to have their children returned to their care and all were very child focused people who wanted to be the best parents they could be.



### Shantelle – Parent Partner

In 2016, I had my two daughters removed after leaving an abusive relationship. I asked for support through the system and received none. I had no voice, no support. I was traumatised by the abuse I had been subjected to, and further traumatised by the unimaginable experience of having my children taken from me.

I was isolated by the experience and unable to process what was happening. I did not know what to do or where to turn. It wasn't until I had an Aboriginal support worker from Warlga Ngurra that my story began to change. I had someone advocating for me. I had emotional support. I had my rights asserted and my kids needs were understood by someone, at last.

In early 2019, my youngest daughter was restored to my care. On that day, the Children's Court Magistrate recommended me as a Parent Partner for a new project piloting in the Broadmeadow Children's Court, stating that I was an "outstanding candidate". This did worlds for my confidence and sense of self. I was validated again as a respected human being. I felt that this recommendation to help others through this project gave me credibility where I had been stuck in a stigmatised mould of the hopeless parent who had her children removed because I must have deserved it.

The court is a traumatising and inhumane space for a parent who has had their children removed. There is no compassion or consideration of the trauma and life choices that many parents experienced. Many parents were once children who were in the system, who had been removed and placed in care. Many have experienced intergenerational trauma, with child removal prevalent in Aboriginal families. Many had been abused, felt powerless, silenced and lost hope. It has been a privilege to sit next to parents, hear their stories, validate their emotions, give them strength, hope and let them know that they are not alone.



## Billy Bob – Parent Partner

I come from a family of intergenerational child removal. My own mother was in foster care for her whole childhood. She did not meet her parents until she was 21. I was removed from my mother's care at about 10 years old. I spent time in foster care, in detention and in residential care where I experienced trauma and loss. From the time I entered care my life was out of control. I was raped and then in a violent relationship. I had my first daughter when I was 17 – I was still in care at the time.

Family life was chaotic. I was drinking and other people in the house were using drugs. The house was not cleaned and there was often not enough money for food and other essentials. My children suffered because of this. I found out later that the Department received 20 plus reports about my children, beginning at my first daughter's birth – but I was never offered any meaningful help. I couldn't believe they knew about my problems all along.

My children were taken. After a few months they were separated from each other as well as from me. They had very different care experiences and their relationships with each other, with me and with other members of our family were damaged. I never gave up on

them and I never stopped trying to keep them safe.

I have completely changed my life since my children were first removed. I became clean and sober within a few months of their removal and have stayed that way ever since. My youngest son was never removed from my care and my two oldest children are back with me. One of my children has stayed in foster care and I am now supporting a guardianship arrangement with his foster carer. It is hard for my other children to understand why he isn't coming home when there are no child protection concerns and he will always be 100% part of our family.

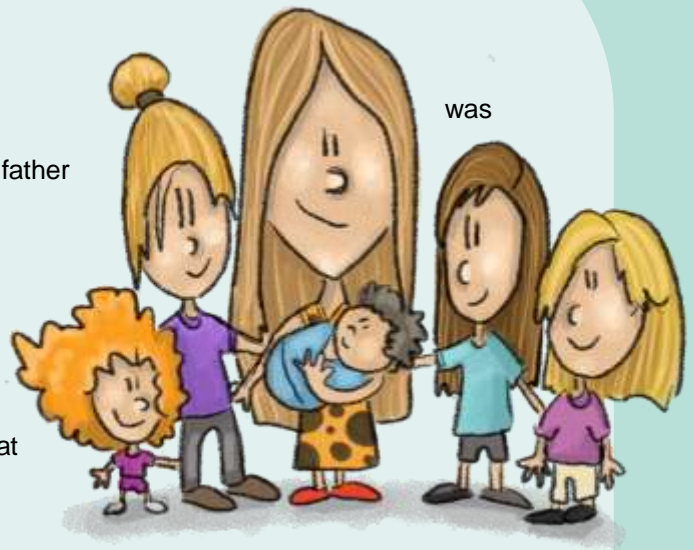
I have been a parent leader of FISH since 2014, talking about my experiences and helping parents and families make sense of their own journey through this confusing system. It just made sense for me to become a Parent Partner when the role came along. I enjoy helping others. I love working in a team and I have learned new skills. It feels great to support people going through what I went through. I believe in peer work and think we need peer work to be part of the child protection system everywhere.

## Sally – Parent Partner

My relationship with the father of my older children

was difficult. He was a drinker, used drugs and was violent towards me. Then I was in a new relationship with the father of my youngest children, but this relationship was also impacted by violence, drugs and alcohol.

In mid-2016, I was 6 months pregnant and had been clean and sober for 7 months. My partner and I had split up and he had left to attend residential drug and alcohol treatment. Despite all this, I still had my girls removed from my care – aged 12, 10, 9 and 15 months. My baby boy was removed at birth later that year. All the children were cared for by my mother. I attended drug and alcohol counselling, DV courses, parenting courses and saw a psychologist.

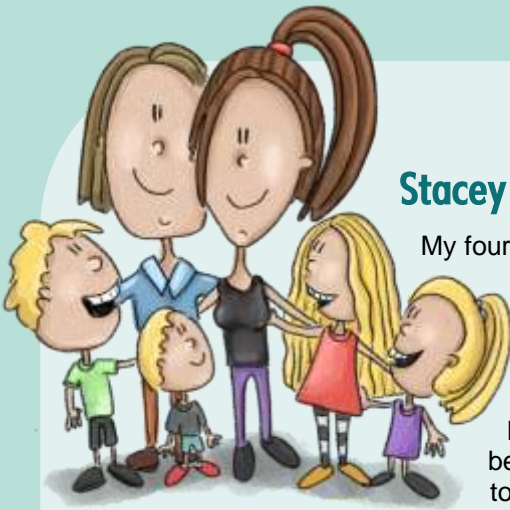


I applied to have my children returned to me in mid-2018 and they returned full time within a few months. The supervision order ended about a year later. I worked incredibly hard to get my children returned to me. It was tough and I had to advocate for them to get what they needed in care and after they came home. It was a really hard time to be a mum.

My partner and I are now back together. We support each other every day to remain sober.

I had to work cooperatively with the Department and multiple other agencies during removal, while they were in care and during restoration. Working with caseworkers was hard but it was important for me to work positively with them even when I didn't always like them. I also had some good workers who believed in me and my kids.

I want to be a Parent Partner because I want to help parents like me. I believe I can provide help and support because of my similar experience. The feelings and thoughts you have are hard to understand unless you have experienced it. I always strive to be empathic and share my experiences in a helpful way. I share what I have learned without making it about myself or my story. I felt like there was nothing for me when it happened, and I want to be there for other people.



## Stacey – Parent Partner

My four children were removed between 2013 and 2015. They are all now back home with my partner and me, and court orders that permanently removed them have been rescinded.

Overall, my experiences with the Department and with carers were a mixture of positive and negative. One caseworker from the Department made an enormous difference for our family. She believed in us and with her support we made the changes we needed to make to get our kids safely home. Sharing my experience of developing a positive relationship with the caseworker is a big part of my motivation to support other parents. I want to pass on what I have learned because if parents can form these relationships with caseworkers it will help them get their kids home.

Being a Parent Partner has been empowering for me. All the responses from the parents I supported have been positive. Lots of parents have no support at all through this process. In court they don't even know what questions to ask, what the next steps are. It was a great feeling being able to answer their questions. As a Parent Partner I am also regularly running morning teas for parents. It is rewarding to see parents grow and watch their confidence build from fortnight to fortnight.

It was a great experience working alongside other court users such as lawyers and caseworkers. I felt like I showed the system and the people in it that parents can succeed and that I have succeeded.

It is an ongoing journey for me and my partner to parent our children who were traumatised in care. They experienced so much loss and grief and carry the scars from that time. I am inspired every day to continue making my voice heard to improve support for parents in restoration.

## Lyn – Project Coordinator

I have been a practicing social worker since 1982 and have worked in health and in child protection settings. I have also been a foster carer – although not the usual kind. Instead of looking after children who had been removed from their families, my partner and I provided preventative respite care to help keep a sibling group of children safely at home.

It was during that carer experience – watching the way this family was treated by the system – that my interest in family inclusion was sparked. I joined other child and family workers to discuss the experiences of family and helped to organise the family inclusive practice forum (Cocks, 2014). Here I also met Felicity Kime, who has gone on to become the President of FISH and a valued colleague.

After volunteering with FISH for a few years I moved on, needing some space for my family. Then in early 2019 I applied to coordinate the PPSP. This was an opportunity I could not turn down. I started recruiting Parent Partners. I began putting together an orientation and induction program and developing a set of draft resources for the workshops that were part of the initial plan. Throughout the project I have provided supervision and support to Parent Partners and helped them to support each other.

It has been a wonderful experience for me, bringing to life an innovative project. Most of all, I have really valued the experience of working so closely with parents who have poured their heart and soul into making this project work. I respect their resilience, their knowledge and skills, and their persistence to give something back to parents who are struggling.



# The Doing...

## Delivering the PPSP



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*I think [parents] are wary at first because they're not sure exactly why we're talking to them. Once they realise it's a bit of a relief, I think, to be able to talk to someone who's not their solicitor, not their caseworker, not someone involved in their case that they could potentially say something that might go against them.*  
(Parent Partner, focus group)

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After months of planning, the PPSP kicked off at Broadmeadow Children's Court on Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> October 2019.

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*She's a mum, just like myself, she has experienced some of the same life experiences I have. She made me feel very comfortable and very supported, in the sense that she has been there and done that, and experienced the same things that I was going through at that time... So, she's been absolutely fantastic, just letting me know I don't have to go through this stuff alone and that I do have support from other mums who are going through what I'm going through.*  
(Parent, interview)

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*I just love supporting the parents because I know what it felt like to sit in that court room without anyone. Knowing I'm going to walk out with no kids. So yeah, it's nice to be able to give back.*  
(Parent Partner, focus group)

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*I was nervous the first time but, after doing the first day, I felt really good. Like it was I 'spose going back for a good reason. Like, if you were going back for a bad reason it would be all over, reliving it all over again. But going back I've had closure. Like I'm in a good place now, so it was fine. I didn't have any worries.* (Parent Partner, focus group)

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## Peer Support at Court

The Parent Partners offered support to parents and family members at the Children's Court at Broadmeadow every Thursday morning. Legal proceedings included new care applications, applications to vary or rescind existing orders, applications for guardianship orders on behalf of carers of children in care (to which parents are a party), and a range of ongoing proceedings.

Parent Partners worked in pairs in the waiting area of the court. They set up a small table with the project brochure, business cards and information sheets which people could browse and take with them. Parent Partners each wore a name badge clearly identifying them as part of the project.

Parent Partners had practiced approaching parents and family and introducing themselves and quickly put their new skills to work. From the beginning, some people were receptive and eager to talk. Others already had some support and others were concerned about who the Parent Partners were and if they were from DCJ. Parent Partners also approached people waiting outside the court building and they reported that sometimes it was easier and more relaxed for people to chat outside, somewhat distanced from the tension that pervades the court;

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*I remember one lady wouldn't talk to us inside and, as soon as she went out, she was having a smoke. Bang! Wanted to talk, you know. Catching people as they're walking out the exit, out of the building, like, when they walk outside to go to their car.  
(Parent Partner, focus group)*

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Parent Partners were well received by parents and other court users including lawyers and caseworkers;

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*There was one lawyer that wanted all the information on the meetings and everything, and he did up all official letters on his letterhead and sent letters to all his clients that he represented in child protection cases. And he's like very big, he's big on it. He's like. "yeah, this is great. This is what we need"...  
(Parent Partner, focus group)*

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*Each time I went to court I would see either one of the girls [parent partners] and they, like if I was stuck or I wasn't understanding something they would try and do their best to help me and assist me through that.  
(Parent, interview)*

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*And [DCJ caseworker] said, "can you come into the room and speak to me and my client?" I went in and had a yarn and he said to the client, "are you alright if I just leave you with [Parent Partner] and she can give you more information?" So, that was probably my biggest win with somebody there that actually said this person's great to talk to.  
(Parent Partner, focus group)*

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*I think what was helpful was... parents were calmer – there was that little bit of dignity that they got back because here were people who could relate to them... that one person to sit there and say, "well mate, you are in this now, you can get out of it. I got out of it". To have that little bit of inspiration to actually help someone at their lowest and even if it is just that, and they go back that night and think "I can beat this, it can be done". I really think that is a message no one else can give.  
(Solicitor, interview)*

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## Who received court support?

As of 15 October 2020, there had been 301 peer work interactions between Parent Partners and parents, family and other people in court (see Figure 7). 75% were with women and 25% with men. Data was not kept on the age of participants, but the overwhelming number of conversations were with adults. The majority of people supported were parents, which suggests that the project reached its target group. The other category included extended family members, support people and other parties to proceedings, such as foster carers.

Most of the conversations (60%) were with an individual. About 40% were with two or more people. Most conversations were initiated by Parent Partners, but sometimes parents and others approached the Parent Partners for support, often after they had already received support on a previous occasion.

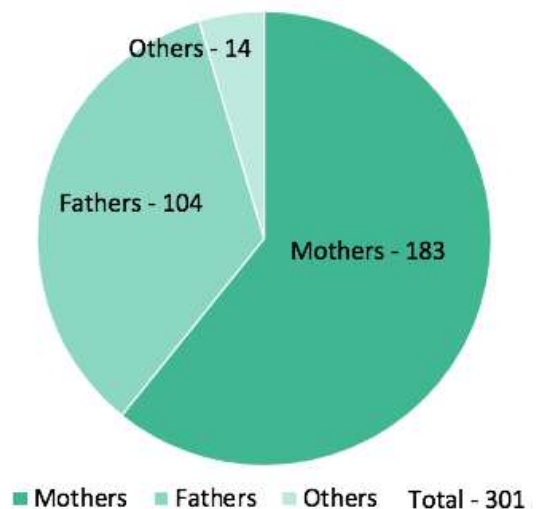


Figure 7: Who received court support

## What did they talk about?

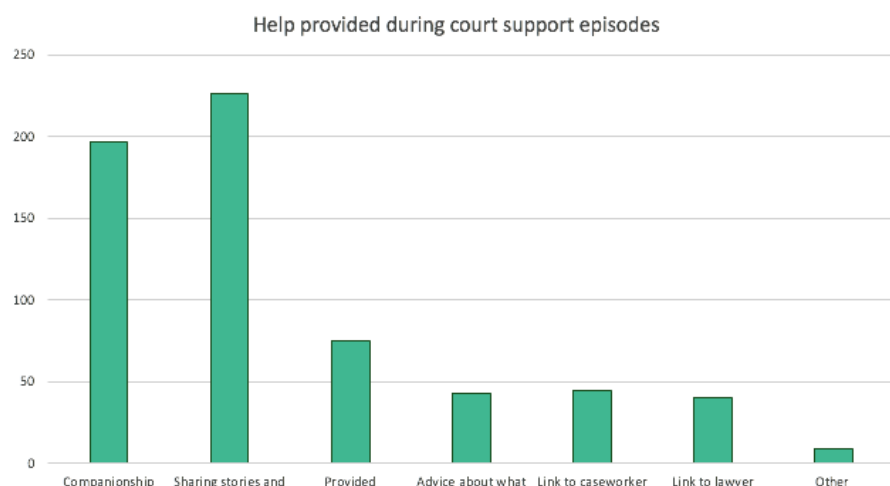
Companionship and emotional support were strong themes during court support. Parents and family wanted someone to talk to and be with for a while. It was very common for people to tell some of their story to Parent Partners and for Parent Partners to share their own experiences.

Information provision and linking parents and family to support was also important. This took the form of providing information resources, other information about community help and resources and providing information about what to expect from legal and other child protection processes. Parent Partners helped parents and family complete forms and made suggestions about what to do next. They linked parents to other key people such as court registry staff, caseworkers and lawyers. Unlike other court-based workers, Parent Partners could personally empathise with the confusion and distress parents feel when arriving in court. They knew many parents would arrive without knowing what was going to happen or what they had to do and how distressing this felt. By sharing their experiences, they were able to quickly form a supportive connection and help parents and others to cope.

Figure 8: Type of support or help provided in court

Parent Partners provided written and online information that matched a parent's needs and the needs of their children, such as, information about family time and relationships with carers. They could also immediately deal with a parent's concerns to get legal advice by linking them to solicitors in court, to court registry staff or pathways to legal aid. They helped parents start to explore more complex information, such as, the meaning and nature of out-of-home care placement for their children.

This is consistent with what FISH parent leaders reported that they needed and wanted when they were going through legal and other processes, and with research findings about what parents said they needed.



# Information Resources

We knew from research and from the experiences of FISH parent leaders that parents find it very difficult to receive and understand information given to them in court and during stressful child protection proceedings.

A set of eight information resources were developed. They broadly covered key issues and processes of interest to parents and were linked to the evidence about family engagement and restoration. For example, we know that parents wanted to maintain and strengthen relationships with their children and that positive relationships with carers and children are linked to restoration. The resources were developed by the project team, with input from other FISH parent leaders and design and graphics by Chrissy McYoung, of Hairy Phish Designs.

It was mainly just confusing.... Because it was such a big shock and all that and it's traumatic, it's hard to remember the exact details, even if it happened six months ago. It's kind of like you're in fight or flight mode. I was in pretty much – just the anxiety the whole time.  
(Quote from parent, Ross et al., 2017)

We wanted to provide parents and family with useful information written by parents and family, for parents and family. We used plain English and colourful and engaging artwork to be accessible and useful over time, with links to other places. Hard copies were made available at the workshops, at FISH morning teas and at the Court and many copies were distributed. The resources are freely available on the FISH website: <https://finclusionh.org/the-project/>. A list with links to the resources is in Appendix E.





## Groups and Workshops

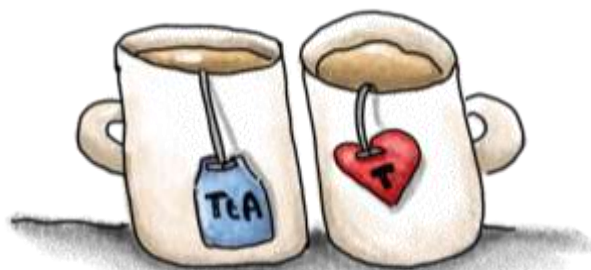
The original project design included development and delivery of a two-hour semi-structured information session with parents and family in the community. The planned session included a range of topics for discussion that were closely linked to the information resources. The intention was for parents and family to choose topics they wanted to talk about, connect with each other and get support as well as useful information. We hoped that Parent Partners would link parents and family to these sessions through their interactions in court, as well as other places, such as, the FISH website and agency referrals.

The semi-structured sessions were trialled in three different locations in the Hunter Valley and attracted six parents in total. Those that did attend said the sessions were helpful and they were primarily seeking support and information. They also reported being busy with other requirements and expectations from DCJ and were not sure that attendance at these sessions would contribute positively to the likelihood of restoration. The Hunter Valley is a large region and many parents may have found it difficult to travel to group locations. After three sessions, the project management team asked the project team to rethink the semi-structured sessions and to recommend an alternative approach.

The team suggested that instead of running separate sessions for already pressured and stressed people, that the project instead leverage from existing group forums already attended by parents. There were two main ways the team proposed that this occur. Firstly, through existing FISH morning teas which had been in place for some time. This first strategy would provide a forum to directly refer parents and family from court which would reconnect them with Parent Partners. Secondly, the project team proposed approaching agencies and organisations that were running group programs for parents and family with children in care and offering for Parent Partners to attend those programs, either as a one-off or as an ongoing part of the group. The programs included evidence-based parenting programs or other parenting programs, such as, the 'Kids in Care' group run by Relationships Australia (Battle, Bendit & Gray, 2014). The second strategy would provide peer support to other parents who may not be currently in court but may be attending group programs.

Both strategies were agreed on and the project team began implementing them in early 2020. Unfortunately, due to the impact of COVID-19, only the FISH morning tea strategy took place. FISH morning teas were initially suspended in late March 2020 but were recommenced in May 2020 using Zoom. They were increased to fortnightly because the project team believed that COVID-19 was causing families and children great distress. In the early days of the pandemic, many agencies routinely stopped or dramatically reduced face-to-face family time between parents, family and children, which compromised restoration plans and contributed to trauma, grief and loss (Family Inclusion Network of South East Queensland, 2020; Family Inclusion Network of Australia, 2020).

In August 2020, face-to-face sessions resumed and Zoom remained an option for parents who could not physically attend, and they continue fortnightly. At mid-October 2020, Parent Partners had facilitated twelve morning teas with an average of 5-7 parents at each group.



## What happens at FISH morning teas?

FISH morning teas are co-facilitated by two Parent Partners who have continued the morning teas that were established by FISH some years ago. They are attended by parents and family with children in care or who previously had children in care. Most parents who attend morning teas hope to be reunited with their children or to improve their relationships with them.

FISH morning teas are always accompanied by food and drink, which helps provide hospitality and a caring welcome for parents and family who are often isolated from support and lack nurturing relationships. People arrive and are welcomed by Parent Partners who introduce newcomers to each other and other group attendees.

The groups are opened with an Acknowledgement of Country. Parent Partners ask the group to revisit the group agreement, suggest changes or additions and new participants are asked to commit to the agreement. The group agreement is a dynamic list of principles and expectations for group conduct and behaviour. It is not a set of rules. It has been developed by parents to facilitate supportive relationship building and there is an understanding that it may change over time to meet the needs of participants. It includes a commitment by Parent Partners that notes from the session will not be taken. Parent Partners then introduce themselves and their experiences. They do this to encourage participants to also share their experiences. Parent Partners role model empathy and encourage behaviour from parents and family that the evidence tells us is linked to restoration and better outcomes for children, including, developing relationships with DCJ, carers and relevant agency staff. Information resources are a useful supplement.

Groups close with a shared reflection and an invite to the next morning tea.



## Phone Support

This was a late addition to the project design due to the impact of COVID-19 and associated shutdowns. From March 2020, Parent Partners were not able to attend court at all, therefore, parents and family could not be offered face-to-face court support. Due to the centrality of court support in the project design and its role in linking parents and family to other elements, COVID-19 could have stalled the project.

The project team was determined to continue during COVID-19 and proposed that court-based peer support be shifted to the phone. The Project Coordinator worked with the project management team to establish a 1300 number and phone support commenced in May 2020. The phone line was promoted on social media (FISH Facebook page) and the FISH website. Initially, phone calls were slow, and the COVID-19 situation made promotion of a new project activity difficult. However, over time, the phone line has received more calls and the project team decided to keep it going.

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*Because of COVID, we couldn't be at the courthouse anymore. So, we've got a 1300 number that parents can call and one of us answers every day between 10 and 12. Then, other times, they can leave a message and we can call them back. Just for that extra support because we weren't at court. But we're going to keep that phone line going now, even when we are at court, because, especially the day after court, people have a lot of questions and if they've seen you before, that day in court, they're more likely to go, "I'm just going to give them a call and ask a few questions".*

*(Parent Partner, focus group)*

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At the time data collection for this report was finalised, in mid-October 2020, Parent Partners had recorded phone calls with 63 people, and some people had multiple calls. Most calls are coming from parents, but, a small number came from workers or lawyers exploring what was offered before referring parents.

Phone discussions could be long at times. Maintaining clear professional boundaries was a challenge especially as parents contacting the PPSP were mostly isolated from both formal and informal supports. The needs of parents were high and continue to emphasise the yawning gap in the service system faced by parents who experience child removal.

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*Parent Partner 1:*

*And, I tried, because I know some of the rehab people go through this stuff with their kids. So, I keep trying to push them through the parent line instead of my Facebook or email, or me in person, you know, but. Yeah, it was a big learning curve again, you know, not to hand that number out, because then I guess you just get calls all the time and, not answering that call, like, I feel that I have to. So, but obviously, this mum needed some help and, a lot of help, but yeah, big learning curve again, trying not to give my number out.*

*Parent Partner 2:*

*I think it goes to show that parents need more support than just at court.*

*(Parent Partners, focus group)*

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# Supervision and Support of Parent Partners



Supervision and support of Parent Partners was central to the PPSP and its importance is a key learning from implementation. None of the Parent Partners had worked in a human service setting before or participated in reflective supervision with a learning focus. Parent Partners were also navigating a transition from the limited and stigmatised role of parent (commonly referred to as ‘birth parents’ by caseworkers and others) to working alongside the professions that had participated in the removal of their children, while also retaining their identity as parents with lived experience. This meant a critical need for supervision.

For other professionals working in the sector, supervision occurs in the context of their specific role or their professional training, their continuing professional development and their experiences in practice. The context and content of supervision for them is their profession and their practice. Their life experience outside of their training and their job role is secondary. For Parent Partners, their role, their employment, and their motivation for the job is tied to their lived experience as a parent who has previously lost children into care. In other words, their lived experience is their qualification – their primary source of expertise. Self-disclosure is a key part of being a Parent Partner, a tool of the trade to help and support parents. In supervision it is appropriate and realistic that time is spent focusing on and exploring past and current lived experience, especially given that their experiences of the child protection system and its processes are contemporary and continue to impact them and their children.

## Individual Supervision During and Following Court Support

Each court support shift was followed by an individual supervision session with the Project Coordinator, usually lasting around 30 minutes. The Project Coordinator prompted the conversation with some basic exploratory questions that supported Parent Partners to reflect on their emotions, learn from their experiences and plan next steps. Providing personal support was particularly important. For Parent Partners, the importance of self-care, in the interests of families and children, was a relatively new concept. They were encouraged to take time for themselves to look after their mental and physical health. For the most part, they tended to see their children and other people as needing priority which left little space in their lives (or budgets) for self-care. Supervision helped them to recognise that they needed to take care of themselves.

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*Parent Partner 1: Talking to [supervisor] it's just easy, it just flows it's natural, if something pops up you know... We talk about it and I really love how you know she says, "so what are you going to go and do for yourself now?"*

*Parent Partner 2: The care for us.*

*Parent Partner 1: Yeah... and she's probably the only person regularly that says "so, what are you going to do for you?" I don't hear that on a daily basis. I don't hear that out of my family, or, do you know what I mean?  
(Parent Partners, focus group)*

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*Supervision sessions were always wide-ranging – I had a set of questions I asked each week but there was always time for Parent Partners to catch me up on what was happening in their life – much more than in a supervision I would usually provide, say to practitioners or students.  
(Project Coordinator, personal communication)*

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As well as planned regular sessions, informal supervision conversations and ongoing availability of the Project Coordinator to Parent Partners was important. It was initially planned that individual supervision would occur away from the court and that Parent Partners would not always have supervision available to them in the court itself. In practice, it soon became clear that availability for “in-the-moment” supervision was important. Thanks to the support of staff at the Children’s Court, the team was provided a small interview room where Parent Partner supervision and support could happen as needed. Parent Partners frequently connected with supervision to check in, ask questions and share experiences, especially if they found a situation stressful or particularly close to their own lived experiences.

The Project Coordinator stayed connected to Parent Partners through weekly emails and updates to the project management team and was available for phone conversations. This was highly valued by Parent Partners;

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*I think maybe we haven’t had any moment of breaking down because we’ve had that supervision... we’ve had the chance to debrief afterwards, or time we need to, so it’s not weighing on us so much.  
(Parent Partner, focus group)*

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Supervision also allowed Parent Partners to consider the impact of their own experiences on how they saw the experiences of others and, in turn, how those experiences might affect their ability to be helpful in their roles. It was not their role to judge, to determine the truth or to play a role in assessment. At first, that was difficult, and it was important to encourage Parent Partners to listen, to accept and to provide non-judgemental support with all the people they interacted with;

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*I found it really hard to support a parent who was giving up their child. ...I think it was my first day. I continued to support him, you know, because he was doing the best he could, with what he had ... it was really hard to swallow, after I’d fought really hard to get my children home supporting a parent who’s handing... handing it over.  
(Parent Partner, focus group)*

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*I listen more than talk to them now. That was my biggest learning. Like, every supervision, it was like, I have to listen more. Listen, listen, listen. Like, I would say that to [coordinator]. So, that’s probably the biggest thing, you know, the listening stuff.  
(Parent Partner, focus group)*

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## Group Supervision and Teamwork

All the Parent Partners had experienced significant trauma in their lives including the trauma of child removal. Traumatic experiences can make it more difficult for individuals and groups to build relationships and learn together, so we expected that building a supportive team with a learning culture may present challenges. During initial induction and training, the Project Coordinator intentionally provided opportunities for relationship building, a sense of belonging and learning from one another. The project team met regularly throughout the project. During COVID-19, the frequency of meetings increased in order to stay connected to the project and to each other;

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*[We are] continuing to have group meetings with [Project Coordinator] for group supervision. We've doing them weekly now, but we get online and have a chat and that's been great.*  
*(Parent Partner, focus group)*

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The focus on team building and group connections paid off. The support that Parent Partners got from each other was increasingly evident as the project progressed. They got to know each other well and those relationships led to teamwork during court support and other project elements. Whenever possible, Parent Partners worked in pairs in the court setting and in group processes. They communicated with each other about how best to approach parents and to offer support based on their strengths and lived experiences.

# Collecting Data and Evaluating



Parent Partners recorded brief demographic information about parents they supported at court and on the phone. Records were also kept about attendance numbers at morning teas and other groups. Examples of collected data are included in this report, as well as quotes from two small qualitative studies designed to evaluate the PPSP (see project one and two below).

Parent partners used a brief online survey on their smartphones after each occasion of seeing a parent. They recorded non-identifying data about the parent and the type of contact and support provided. Later in the project, they gave parents the option of providing a contact email or phone number to send follow up information and project updates. When the project introduced a phone line, a similar survey was created and completed after each call.

**Examples of project data** that were collected by Parent Partners included: gender, approach (I approached, the person approached me, other), identity (mother, father, etc.), first or subsequent contact, topics (companionship, personal, asked for more info, next steps, casework, law), time spent with person, action taken (e.g., invitation to workshop, provided project information).

The two research projects, concerned with evaluating the PPSP, are being conducted by a partnership of researchers from the Newcastle Law School, LWB, and FISH. At the time of this report, data was still being collected and some quotes have been used in this report. Detailed findings will be reported elsewhere. The aims and methods of the projects are:

**Project One: Parents & court users:** Surveys (online) with parents and semi structured interviews with parents and court users, such as, lawyers and support staff, to explore experiences of parents who have children subject to care applications in Broadmeadow Children's Court of the impact of peer support, group processes, and resources.

**Project Two: Parent Partners:** Four focus groups (semi-structured, action learning) were completed with the Parent Partners to examine their experiences of providing peer support for other parents and family. There is a plan to add individual interviews with Parent Partners and the Project Coordinator.

# Impact of the Project on Parent Partners



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*Being a Parent Partner changed my life and has strengthened my sense of self. I am finally in a position where I have healed enough to share my experiences to empower other parents, share strength and hope.*  
(Parent Partner, personal communication)

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During focus groups, Parent Partners said they have increased their skills and confidence in the peer role. They feel increasingly positive about providing peer support to other parents. The experience of speaking to so many family members has been invaluable for their development, especially their communication and their ability to listen to others without judgment. The project has affirmed their strength and resilience in the fight to rebuild family relationships for children and for children to be safely returned to family. It has reminded them of how hard they worked, and continue to work, to keep their families together and their children safe and well.

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*Well, I feel more validated as, I don't know, as a person and as a parent. I felt very ripped apart in a way from going through the system and feeling labelled and shamed and stigmatised. I was recommended to this project through my lawyer from a conversation that she had with the magistrate at restoration of my daughter last year.... I don't know, I felt human again. I felt like a worthwhile mother again and from this project I feel, yeah, I feel valued.*  
(Parent Partner, focus group)

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Two Parent Partners commenced new or further study as a result of working in the project. For one Parent Partner this was the second time she has been employed in the paid workforce. It has contributed to increased motivation and self-belief to continue to participate in the labour market and to continue to support parents, families and children. Parent Partners' work on this project also demonstrated to their children how much they care about others and their capacity to do meaningful work.

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*That's something I've been saying for four years, 'I'm gonna do, I'm gonna do', and put off. And then, I started this project and I just got this, I don't know, this thing happened and I, yeah, "okay, let's just study as well", and I'm gonna do my diploma, start my diploma at the end of the year and, you know, and it's gave me this purpose... I think I've had one job in my life, other than this stuff so, you know, getting involved, getting into a routine.*  
(Parent Partner, focus group)

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The Parent Partner team have become a supportive network for each other. They have had the opportunity to develop and practice a range of professional skills including planning, writing, resource development, reflective practice, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, group facilitation, and applying ethical frameworks;

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*Just like we've been able to connect with the parents in court, we've been able to connect with each other. I've found it easier to connect to the Parent Partners that I work with than other people that I work with in different roles, or other people that I study with, or, even other friends that I've had for a very long time because they haven't gone through what I've gone through.*  
(Parent Partner, focus group)

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*I think it's like, I feel that I'm making a bit of a difference in some way, like with someone's day at court. I make a difference in a day.*  
(Parent Partner, focus group)

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# Learnings for Ongoing Implementation



**“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”**

Margaret Mead

This section covers what we have learned from the PPSP and our thoughts for future practice. We identified the following as key learning areas:

- The PPSP has highlighted a much larger need
- Parent and family need advocacy as well as support
- Trauma informed processes of training, induction and supervision
- Parent and family leadership from FISH
- Committed leadership from allies in the sector
- Critical connections with the Children’s Court
- Practical tips for groups and work in the community
- Allies, readiness and resistance
- The need for ongoing evaluation

## The PPSP has highlighted a much larger need

This was not an unexpected finding as it has emerged repeatedly from research. It remains very important to highlight.

It quickly became clear from Parent Partners’ interactions with parents, families and sector workers that there is an enormous need for improved and increased support and advocacy that was not met by this trial project. This was a “light touch” project which could only offer brief services. Parent Partners regularly heard parents and family talk about how they had little or no support to help them navigate the system or to take the necessary steps to have their children home again. Parent Partners found it stressful that they could not meet the need, which was an important area for supervision and support. They were being asked to use their experiences to help parents cope but could not link parents to the support they needed to help them do well because the resources were not available.

The trial has demonstrated a need for a greater intensity of all the project elements and the addition of intensive individual support and advocacy for parents and family throughout their journey through the child protection system. Families benefitted from the individual support they received in court and in the limited legal processes that were included in this trial. They would have benefitted much more if they had reliable access to peer support and advocacy in the range of other legal and child protection processes and in accessing services that they needed to resolve child protection concerns.

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*We're dealing with people who don't have internet access, who don't have computers, they don't have smartphones... I know we're really limited in what we're able to do because of funding and all that kind of stuff, but I think that it actually requires a more intense form of assistance from [parent partners].*  
(Solicitor, interview)

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## Parent and family need advocacy as well as support

The PPSP was not adequately resourced to include an advocacy focus. Parent Partners did undertake some advocacy activities, such as, encouraging parents and family to ask questions about their case plan, and accompanying them when they spoke to caseworkers. Parent Partners regularly saw a need for parents and family to have someone to speak on their behalf, argue for resources, question case plans and provide coaching to participate meaningfully in processes. Parent Partners could not meet that need because of the resource restrictions of such a small trial project. Future efforts at peer work should clearly and explicitly integrate an advocacy role with a focus on parent and family participation.

## Trauma informed processes of training, induction and supervision

Parent Partners benefitted from a trauma informed training and induction process before they commenced their peer roles and in ongoing trauma informed supervision. These processes are described elsewhere in this report but need to be emphasised because a trauma informed approach is so important in this context:

- **Process past experiences while also learning about their new roles.** During induction Parent Partners had opportunity to do this, which required them to think about past trauma and plan how to manage triggering situations.
- **Explore professional relationships with parents being supported.** Parent Partners understood better than anyone how isolating it can be to face and experience child removal as a parent. They initially wanted to reduce that isolation in ways that may have compromised their roles and contributed to stress and burnout. A supportive induction prepared them and lay the groundwork for self-care. Ongoing supervision helped to prevent and mitigate vicarious trauma.
- **Project Coordinator present during court support.** This was important and provided a form of live supervision which may have reduced secondary trauma. Just being in the court environment, where Parent Partners themselves had previously experienced pain and distress, triggered different emotions and reactions. The experiences and emotions of families was also stressful at times for Parent Partners.

## **Parent and family leadership from Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter Inc (FISH)**

As a result of the PPSP and other FISH initiatives, participation by parent leaders in meetings traditionally restricted to agency leaders is an increasing phenomenon in the Hunter Valley. The child protection system is dominated by professional experts. Rules and decisions are made by people in positions of power and authority who have limited or no shared lived experience with the children and families affected by them. The voices of parents, family and children are drowned out by noise from media and interest groups and inhibited by experiences of stigma and shame. We wanted this project to challenge traditional ideas of expertise and authority in child protection and have genuine parent and family leadership.

The PPSP was co-designed by parent and family leaders and their allies. The original program logic was designed by a subcommittee of FISH and endorsed by the FISH Committee. FISH did not auspice the project because of a lack of organisational infrastructure, but FISH was on the project management team along with the two other project partner organisations. Two of the Parent Partners were long standing FISH Committee members who had been advocating for family inclusion for several years. The other Parent Partners knew about FISH and had taken part in FISH activities and events. As a result of their ongoing connection to FISH they have since become committee members.

The Parent Partners were supported by the Project Coordinator to make decisions about project management. They made plans and decisions about rostering, planning and promotion. Along with another FISH parent leader they developed content for information resources and contributed to design. They attended Steering Committee meetings and formed relationships with leaders from local agencies. Parent Partners, including the FISH Committee President, spoke frankly to multiple agency leaders about their experiences and the need for changes to the system.

## **Committed leadership from allies in the sector – supporting parent and family leadership**

This project has emerged from several years of teamwork and commitment to family inclusion from parent leaders and their allies including researchers, educators and social workers from the Newcastle Law School and from Life Without Barriers. This small group of parents and their allies has now led to a much larger coalition of support for peer support and advocacy. This project helped create space for those partnerships to develop and strengthen and laid the groundwork for future work.

It was a lot of work and resources were tight. Key leaders, including all project management team members from the three partner organisations, regularly gave their own time. Members of the Steering Committee also contributed voluntary time when it was needed and the Parent Partners themselves were incredibly committed and reliable and contributed time voluntarily in a range of ways.

A key learning from this project is to ensure there are strong and committed leaders, who will ally with parents and family, persist when things get tough, remain patient in explaining and promoting the importance of parent and family inclusion in the interests of children and have the courage and imagination to try new things in a risk averse practice context.

## Critical connections with the Children's Court

This project relied on support from, and collaboration with, the Magistrate and her team at Broadmeadow Children's Court. The support of other court users was also essential and considerable effort was put into developing key relationships, promoting the project and preparing court users for the Parent Partner role. Court staff and other court users shared concerns and made useful practical suggestions. All of these were carefully considered, responded to and integrated.

The project team also attended regular Children's Court networking events and ensured the Magistrate and her team had the opportunity to meet personally with the Parent Partners before they commenced formally in their roles. Any potential conflict of interest issues for the Magistrate were raised when they became apparent. Court users included DCJ court liaison staff, the NSW Office of the Sheriff, solicitors and other support people and volunteers.

Support from the Children's Court included promoting the project, displaying project materials, allocating space within the waiting area and ensuring the Project Coordinator had a quiet space for supervision. The Magistrate was an active Steering Committee member.

## Flexibility and adaptability

Be prepared to be flexible and adapt to local conditions. We integrated groups because we knew there was good evidence for groupwork from elsewhere with an emphasis on education. We originally planned a semi-structured group workshop but, when we didn't get the interest we hoped for, we changed our approach to leverage from existing groups in the community being run by FISH. We did all this during a global pandemic! Flexibility and willingness to change and adapt are crucial for innovative child protection work.



## Allies, readiness and resistance

Become an ally! Start talking about peer parent and family support and advocacy as a valuable contribution to child protection and to making the system better for children. When developing and running new initiatives, no matter how small, take every opportunity to inform people, including but not limited to social media and other more formal channels.

Be prepared to encounter and navigate resistance and anxiety. Some agency staff and leaders will be apprehensive about peer work. It is important to listen carefully to their concerns and aim to understand and resolve them together. Unless an individual or an agency is strongly opposed, we would suggest apprehension and anxiety be framed as opportunities to build support and allies. It is important to find and build relationships with key leaders who are in support of peer work and invite them to champion and promote it.

Be prepared to encounter difficulties and to persist. Doing innovative practice in a risk averse practice culture like the child protection system is not easy and integrating new processes and people can take time. This project introduced parents with lived experience of child removal into the child protection workforce, working alongside lawyers and caseworkers to play a role in supporting parents and family. The project management team read widely and learned from the development of peer work internationally (for example, Better Care Network, 2020; Cocks, 2018).

Consider organisational readiness. The three partner organisations had considered and researched peer parent and family advocacy for some time and were ready to trial it. FISH had been championing peer work for several years and providing voluntary peer support and advocacy for a similar period. It provided a supportive environment for Parent Partners. A partnership with a parent and family led organisation is ideal.

## The need for ongoing evaluation

There is an emerging evidence base for peer parent and family advocacy in child protection, largely coming from the United States. Further peer work efforts and associated evaluations are needed in Australia. Ideally, this will include evaluations of larger projects and service designs with a greater level of intensity and involvement in the lives of parents, family and children. If the impact of this work is like the USA, it is likely that peer parent and family advocacy initiatives will be found to contribute to restoration and to shorter stays in care. Peer support and advocacy will also offer help and support to parents and family during perhaps the most difficult and most traumatic time in their lives (Cocks, in press).

Consideration will need to be given to the added pressure on parents of evaluation and research activities. In court and other child protection activities, they have to deal with a lot of people and complicated processes. There is a potential added burden of being asked to participate in evaluation or research at, or around, the same time. Another important consideration is that parents and family in the child protection system have experienced records being used negatively by child protection authorities. This may result in worry and suspicion about exposure and recording of their experiences, for example, in surveys, interviews, or similar. To alleviate some of those issues, it is worthwhile to consider involvement of peers in research with parents as a critical element, which can include consultation on methods and tools and as co-researchers.

# From little things...

## Big Things are Coming



As the PPSP drew to an end, the project partners began to consider next steps. It was clear that the project was valued by parents, other court users and by the broad range of agencies on the Steering Committee. It was also clear that there is still a lot more to learn and explore about the impact of the project and that the trial period had not been enough time to learn about this impact properly, especially as it was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

After careful consideration, FISH made the decision to continue all four elements of the service after the trial project ended. The court support element required new approval from the President of the NSW Children's Court, which was received in October 2020. From November 2020, FISH is now the sole manager of the newly formed *FISH Parent and Family Support and Advocacy Service* in the Hunter Valley. At the time of writing this report, FISH was using reserves generated by its fee for service activities to fund the Parent and Family Support and Advocacy Service and was seeking ongoing funding to continue and expand. FISH hopes to partner with Aboriginal organisations and advocates to do this and continues to have the support and assistance of Life Without Barriers, the University of Newcastle and other organisation and individual allies in a range of ways.

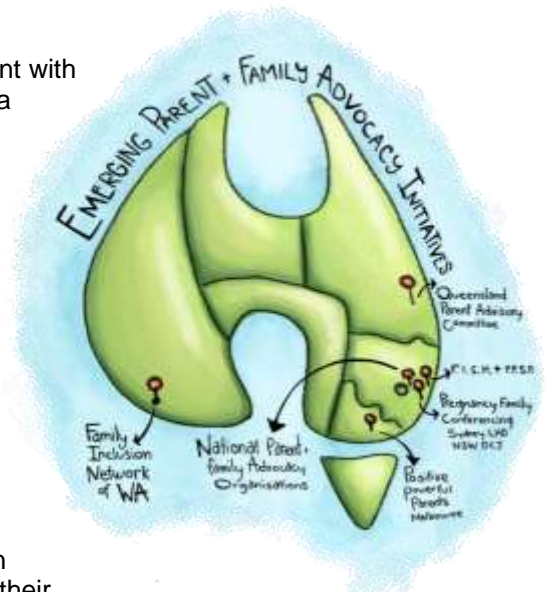
FISH is one of many emerging parent and family advocacy organisations both within Australia and internationally. Along with organisations in the USA, Canada, the UK, Norway and New Zealand, FISH has helped to establish the International Parent Advocacy Network (IPAN).<sup>11</sup> Peer parent and family advocacy and support in child protection is also beginning to emerge elsewhere in Australia. The examples below are by no means an exhaustive list and we look forward to hearing about other peer work initiatives emerging soon.

**Family Inclusion Network of Western Australia, Perth.** FIN WA<sup>12</sup> has been using an action-research approach to develop training and support for peer work in child protection. Over the past two years parents with lived experience of involvement with child protection have participated in training, and then worked alongside FIN WA staff to support and encourage families to understand and stay engaged with the child protection processes in WA, and to have a sense of hope while they do the hard work of making necessary changes.

In August 2020, FIN WA has appointed a Family Partner (a parent with lived experience) to work alongside a FIN WA parent advocate (a social worker) in the Pilot Therapeutic Court. The Pilot Court is different to general child protection court in that the parent can speak directly to the magistrate, have all the supports sitting around the table, with at least an hour for discussion. This time allows families to go over things they don't understand and be clear about the steps needed before the next court session.

### **Pregnancy Family Conferencing. Sydney Local Health District / NSW Department of Communities and Justice.**

This is a program offered to pregnant women and their families where significant child protection concerns have been identified for the unborn baby. Participation is voluntary and the meetings are facilitated by an independent person who helps participants develop plans to address child protection risks so that there is an increased likelihood that babies can remain safely in the care of their



<sup>11</sup> For more information about IPAN, visit: <https://www.parentadvocacy.net/>

<sup>12</sup> For more information visit: [www.finwa.org.au](http://www.finwa.org.au)

parents. However, parents are often fearful of child protection involvement and find it difficult to participate in these processes effectively.

The pregnancy conferencing team at Sydney Local Health District who work across Canterbury and Royal Prince Alfred hospitals have appointed peer workers to support parents before they attend a pregnancy family conferencing meeting. This innovative project is being led by the pregnancy family conferencing coordinators and is being evaluated.<sup>13</sup>

**Positive Powerful Parents, Melbourne.**<sup>14</sup> A self-advocacy group run by and for parents with intellectual disability. Positive Powerful Parents began because of the numbers of parents with an intellectual disability that do not get the supports they needed to keep their children at home and end up involved with the child protection system. Some of the things Positive Powerful Parents do are:

- hold morning tea's for parents with intellectual disability
- run training across Australia for parents to start their own self advocacy groups
- run other events for parents with intellectual disability
- support each other as parents with intellectual disability
- work with parent groups to share information and experiences
- work with government and other organisations to improve outcomes for parents with intellectual disability
- make resources for parents with intellectual disability

**Queensland Parent Advisory Committee (QPAC)**<sup>15</sup>. Established in 2020, this committee is run by the Family Inclusion Network of South East Queensland in collaboration with the QLD Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women. An Australia-first, the QPAC is made up of parents and family with lived experience of the child protection and family support system. QPAC meets regularly with the Minister for Child Safety and the Director General of the Department to help ensure the voices of parents and family in Queensland are being heard at the policy level.

**National Parent and Family Advocacy organisations.** The Family Inclusion Network of Australia<sup>16</sup> was formed in 2008. It is a member organisation made up of family inclusion organisations around Australia and is also well represented in IPAN with Board members from two states. The history of the Family Inclusion movement in Australia has been published elsewhere (Ainsworth & Berger, 2014). It continues to grow and thrive as a result of increasing parent and family leadership.

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<sup>13</sup> At the time of writing the project is about to get going. For more information contact Daniela Lewkowicz and Zia Tayebjee by email:

[Daniela.lewkowicz@dcj.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Daniela.lewkowicz@dcj.nsw.gov.au) and [zia.tayebjee@health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:zia.tayebjee@health.nsw.gov.au)

<sup>14</sup> For more information about Positive Powerful Parents visit: [www.positivepowerfulparents.com.au](http://www.positivepowerfulparents.com.au)

<sup>15</sup> For more information visit [www.finseq.org.au/](http://www.finseq.org.au/)

<sup>16</sup> For more information visit <http://familyinclusionnetwork.com/>

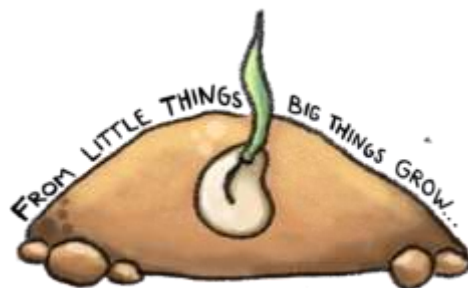
# Conclusion



The development and implementation of the PPSP in Newcastle has broken new ground in Australian child protection policy and practice. Alongside other emerging initiatives it has employed parent peers in roles to support families dealing with one of the most traumatic and difficult processes imaginable – the forced removal of their children. This project was developed and implemented by a coalition of three organisations. Unlike other child protection services, this project integrated leadership from parents and family themselves through the involvement of a parent-led organisation – Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter Inc. While the funded project has ended, FISH is now continuing the work under its own auspices and hopes to expand parent and family advocacy and support in the Hunter.

**All kids need their parents in their lives  
– one way or the other.**

Felicity Kime, FISH President





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# Appendices



Appendix A: PPSP Steering Committee Agencies

Appendix B: Position Descriptions: Parent Partner and Project Coordinator

Appendix C: Parent Partner Recruitment Flyer

Appendix D: Project Brochure

Appendix E: Information resources

## Appendix A: PPSP Steering Committee Agencies

	Agency / Role
1.	NSW Aboriginal Legal Service
2.	Awabakal Ltd
3.	NSW Children's Court Broadmeadow
4.	NSW Department of Communities and Justice
5.	Department of Education
6.	Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle
7.	Family Support Newcastle (Chairperson)
8.	Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter Inc
9.	Grandmothers Against RemovalsNSW
10.	Intellectual Disability Rights Service (IDRS)
11.	Hunter Community Legal Centre
12.	Life Without Barriers
13.	Newcastle Law School
14.	NSW Hunter and New England Health District
15.	NSW Legal
16.	PPSP Project Coordinator /FISH
17.	Harpers Legal
18.	Relationships Australia
19.	Samaritans Foundation
20.	Social Work School, University of Newcastle
21.	Uniting Care - Newpin

## Appendix B: Position Descriptions: Parent Partner and Project Coordinator

**Position Title:** Parent Partner  
**Manager:** Project Coordinator

**Purpose of Role:** To provide peer support and education to parents participating, or at high risk of participating, in care and protection proceedings in the Children's Court of NSW at Broadmeadow as part of a pilot program.

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### 1. Reporting Structure

Supervisor of Parent Partner: Project Coordinator

Project Coordinator reports to the Project Manager, Newcastle Law School, University of Newcastle.

### 2. Key Responsibilities

- Provide brief information, emotional support and advocacy to parents and family at the Broadmeadow Children's Court and in other locations as determined.
- Collect data to assist in the administration and evaluation of the project and write brief notes on interactions with parents and family in line with approved guidelines.
- Assist in the review of educational resources for parents and families to assist them to navigate the care and protection system, including the legal system and legal processes
- In partnership with professional staff, co-facilitate short workshops in the community aimed at increasing parents' understanding of the care and protection system
- Engage in regular supervision of peer support providers and team work activities and follow directions from the project coordinator.
- Professionally represent Newcastle Law School and the project at all times through professional conduct, dress and in all communications and in line with the University of Newcastle Code Of Conduct and relevant policies on social media and confidentiality pertaining to the project.

**Important:** Parent Partners may be present at times when parents talk to their lawyers to provide emotional support, with the lawyer's consent. The Parent Partner role cannot participate in conversations or any interactions between parents, family members and lawyers unless invited to by both the parent and the lawyer, or speak or communicate in any way on behalf of parents or family members to either the lawyer or the Court, unless invited to by the lawyer or the Court. Parent Partners will be required to sign a commitment to adhere to this requirement when they are appointed and to participate in training and supervision to support how they work in the role.

### **3. Selection Criteria**

#### **Essential Criteria**

1. Previous lived experience of child removal and placement in out of home care (as a parent or other close family member) along with personal change that led to improved safety and wellbeing for children.
2. Confidence to empathically share own learning and life change with families who are currently experiencing the removal of children into care or are at high risk of child removal within professional boundaries.
3. Knowledge (based on lived experience) of the child protection and out of home care system in NSW, including an understanding of the law and a willingness and capacity to learn.
4. Ability to work in partnership with agencies and workers in the interests of children and young people
5. Ability to be well organised and manage time and tasks.
6. Good verbal communication skills and ability to work well with people. .
7. Ability to read and write including reading written instructions and completing forms

Probity checks will be implemented. It is expected that the issues that have contributed to past child protection involvement have been resolved for 12 months or more and there is no ongoing involvement with NSW FACS in relation to child protection concerns. Applicants will need to give permission for this to be verified directly with NSW FACS and potentially with other agencies.

#### **Desirable**

1. Community Services Certificate or Diploma level qualification
2. Employment or volunteer work with a community organisation
3. Lived experience that includes a restoration/reunification process or sustaining a quality parenting relationship with children remaining in care
4. Awareness of resources available in the community that may help families with a child in care

**Position Title:** Project Coordinator Parent Peer Support project

**Manager:** Project Manager or her delegate

**Purpose of Role:** To coordinate the planning, development, and implementation of the Parent Peer Support Project conducted by the Newcastle Law School in partnership with Life Without Barriers and Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter.

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### 1. Reporting Structure

Supervisor of Project Coordinator: Project Manager or her delegate

The project coordinator will also engage in professional supervision provided by other members of the project management team.

### 2. Key Responsibilities

- Provide overall coordination of the project with oversight and management from the Project Manager and the Project Management Team
- Develop, trial, and review electronic and paper-based learning resources for parents about the child protection system in NSW with an emphasis on legal proceedings
- Develop trial and review workshop material based on the learning resources to enable a short workshop to be delivered as required with parents who are commencing or at risk of commencing care and protection legal proceedings in the Broadmeadow Children's Court
- Recruit, train, support and supervise Parent Partners
- Collaborate with other stakeholders including the Broadmeadow Children's Court, legal service providers, non-government organisations and NSW Department of Family and Community Services to deliver the project
- Collect data and otherwise participate in the administration and evaluation of the project
- Provide and engage in regular individual and group supervision, teamwork activities, and training as required.
- Professionally represent Newcastle Law School and the project at all times through professional conduct, dress and in all communications and in line with the University of Newcastle Code Of Conduct and relevant policies on social media and confidentiality pertaining to the project.

### 3. Selection Criteria

#### Essential

1. A relevant degree in law, social work or social science and five years or more experience in the child protection system as a practitioner in a government or non-government setting.
2. Demonstrated extensive contemporary knowledge about the care and protection system in NSW, family inclusion in care and protection practices and processes, and working within a children's rights and best interest's framework.
3. Experience and skill in facilitating workshops in a directly relevant area such as family violence and child protection.
4. Demonstrated experience in planning, implementing and managing projects related to the project focus.
5. Excellent time management, organisational, interpersonal, and written skills.
6. Current Driver's Licence and ability to travel

Probity checks will be implemented.

#### Desirable

Post graduate qualifications in own discipline and /or qualifications and experience in adult learning and education.



## Appendix C: Parent Partner Recruitment Flyer

# JOB OPPORTUNITY

# Parent Partner

Supporting parents at court

This Parent Partner job is part of a  
**PARENT PEER SUPPORT PROJECT**  
A trial peer support service to help parents who are attending  
**Broadmeadow Children's Court** for child protection matters.

**PARENT PARTNERS:**

- Work a few hours per week (casual hours).
- Are part of a team.
- Meet with and provide support to parents at court.
- Run workshops for parents new to the system.
- Get training, support, and supervision.

**INTERESTED? CAN YOU ANSWER 'YES' TO THESE STATEMENTS?**

- ✓ My children were removed from my care because of child protection concerns (as a parent or other close family member).
- ✓ The child protection concerns in my case have now been resolved for at least 12 months. (You may still have children in care).
- ✓ I have made changes in my life that have been good for my children.
- ✓ I want to use my experiences in the child protection system and court to help others.
- ✓ I am a good listener.
- ✓ I respect other people and their opinions.

**IF YOU ANSWERED 'YES' TO THE STATEMENTS THEN GET IN TOUCH TO FIND OUT MORE. YOU MAY BE A GREAT PARENT PARTNER!**

Contact Lyn Stoker, Project Coordinator,  
to organise a chat and to get more info:

M: 0402 874 385 E: [parentpeersnewcastle@gmail.com](mailto:parentpeersnewcastle@gmail.com)

Project Partners

Project funded by  
Law and Justice Foundation NSW

Newcastle Law School  
THE UNIVERSITY OF  
NEWCASTLE  
AUSTRALIA

WE  
LIFE WITHOUT BARRIERS  
VE

4/3/2019

## Appendix D: Project Brochure

### Parent Partners



**Sharelle**



**Felicity**



**Rachel**



**Kristy**



**Ange**

We know what it's like to have children removed and placed in care. It is hard and exhausting, and you feel alone. It can really help to get support and information from people who have been there and who understand what it's like.




**Find us on Facebook:  
Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter**

**What we do:**

- Support Parents in Court
- Workshop for Parents: My kids have been removed, what should I expect?
- Online Resources

**You specify the**

**Name Workshops**

**Location**



**LAW AND JUSTICE FOUNDATION**  
CHILDREN'S COURTS

This is a short term project - expected to finish mid 2020




Leaflet Illustrated & Designed by  
Chrissy McYoung @ Halry Phish  
www.halryphish.bigcartel.com

**Project based at  
Broommeadow Children's Court  
Newcastle 2019**

**Parentpeersnewcastle@gmail.com**

## PARENT PEER SUPPORT PROJECT



We are parent partners. We will be in Court to provide information and support for parents involved in care and protection Court proceedings.

We are parents who have previously had experience in Children's Court. We have navigated the child protection system ourselves.

We cannot provide legal advice, but we can listen to you and may have some helpful tips and ideas from our experience.

You will see us around in the waiting room of the Court - come & say "Hi".

Contact us  
[Parentpeersnewcastle@gmail.com](mailto:Parentpeersnewcastle@gmail.com)

### My kids have been removed. What should I expect?


**Workshop**



You are invited to meet and share a cuppa with other parents who are going through the children's court process to learn about what to expect and get some tips and ideas about how to manage the process for yourself and your kids.



You will get the chance to talk to experienced parent partners who have been through it before and can share what helped them at the time.



If you need help to get to the workshop, please let us know and we might be able to help.



If you want to get information about future workshops, then go to:  
<http://www.finclusionh.org/ppsp-information>  
or email: [parentpeersnewcastle@gmail.com](mailto:parentpeersnewcastle@gmail.com).




We will also post updates on Facebook - just search for Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter - and like our page.

### The workshop will cover topics like:

- 

**1. What to expect in court.**
- 2. Time with my kids - How to make the most of it.**


- 

**3. Working with caseworkers from the department.**
- 4. Working with my lawyer.**


- 

**5. Getting my kids home.**

## Appendix E: Information resources

These resources were created by parents for parents and family as part of the Parent Peer Support Project, 2019-2020. They are on the FISH website.



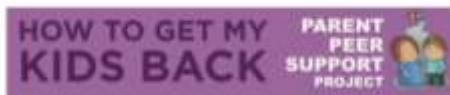
<https://finclusionh.org/spending-time-with-my-kids-2/>



<https://finclusionh.org/working-with-the-department/>



<https://finclusionh.org/building-a-relationship-with-carers-2/>



<https://finclusionh.org/how-to-get-my-kids-back/>



<https://finclusionh.org/asking-the-courts-for-my-kids-back/>



<https://finclusionh.org/first-steps-in-the-court-process/>



<https://finclusionh.org/why-have-a-lawyer/>



