FAMILY INCLUSION ROUNDTABLE

2024

University of Newcastle

NuSpace, Hunter Street, Newcastle

Wednesday 24 April 2024

Contents

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Appendices

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

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Participating organisations and groups

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

1. Executive Summary

1.1. Purpose and background

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

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

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

- Greater understanding and a shared definition of family inclusion.

- Commitments to agreed principles and strategies to underpin the development of family inclusive policy and practice.

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

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[1] Ross, N., Cocks, J., Foote, W., & Davies, K. (2023). http://dx.doi.org/10.25817/sk7h-sy84
Study conducted by the University of Newcastle – Newcastle School of Law and Justice, Social Work, and Social Sciences – with support for researcher involvement from Life Without Barriers (LWB) and funding contributions from the University of Newcastle and NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ).

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

processes to be actively valued by people around children who are, or are at risk of, removal and living in OOHC.

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

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

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

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

1.3. Definition of family inclusion

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

During the Roundtable, this definition was a reference point for discussing questions and different journey stages allocated to groups.

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

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

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle 2024

Table groups also commented on how to improve it.

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

1.4. Roundtable overview

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

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

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

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

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

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

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

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

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

1.5. Roundtable discussions, outcomes, and ideas

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

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

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

Greater voice for families and communities around children

Shifting towards a strength-based, non-adversarial framework

Challenging biases and assumptions

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

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

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

Issues and gaps

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

How 'family' is defined

Shortcomings in including family

Absence of practices that appropriately and effectively acknowledge parents' and families' agency and their ability to be part of decisions about their children.

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

Recognition and understanding of family

Culturally appropriate services

Communication and information

Building relationships in the sector

System and funding issues

Governance and measuring impact

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

Ideas for improvement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The power of lived experiences

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

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

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

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

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

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

Maintaining momentum for family inclusion

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

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

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

2. Recommendations

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

2.1. Recommendations (overarching)

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

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

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

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

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

2.2. Recommendations (process stages)

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

Prior to an application to the Children's Court

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

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

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

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

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

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

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

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

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

Legal Proceedings commenced but children at home

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

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

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

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

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

During court/ Just after removal

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

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

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

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

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

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

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

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

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

Permanently placed in out-of-home care

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

Governance

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

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

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

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

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

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

3. Roundtable overview

There was a full program for the day, central to which were table discussions with mixed groups of participants providing various perspectives on family inclusion and related challenges and ideas.

3.1. Agenda

An overview of the agenda is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Roundtable agenda

Introduction	Associate Professor Wendy Foote, MC
Acknowledgement of Country	Aunty Deb Swan, Grandmothers Against Removal NSW
Welcome	Associate Professor Amy Maguire, Director, Centre for Law and Social Justice
Minister's statement	Hon Kate Washington MP
Introduction of keynote speaker	Hon Sharon Claydon MP
Keynote Presentation	Aunty Deb Swan
Family Inclusion Research	Hon Associate Professor Nicola Ross
Introducing Table Discussions	Tammy Prince-Doyle, FISH President & Rachel Evans, Manager, FISH Peer Support and Advocacy Service
Table Discussions Part One	1. Defining family inclusion (seeking endorsement) 2. Gaps in practice
Table Discussions Part Two	3. Supporting family inclusion & addressing gaps 4. Maintaining momentum (seeking endorsement) 5. Forming an alliance (seeking interest)
Networking	
Feedback from table discussions	Nominated spokespersons
Feedback & wrap up	Tammy Prince-Doyle & Rachel Evans
Thanks	Nicola Ross
Lunch & Networking	

3.2. Speakers

Several speakers opened the day and provided background and context for the Family Inclusion Roundtable. They posed important considerations for the group to think about during the day.

Associate Professor Amy Maguire, Director, Centre for Law and Social Justice noted that family inclusion is fundamental to upholding children's rights under international law and recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples internationally, including:

- The right to protection against arbitrary or unlawful interference with the family which includes interference with Aboriginal Kin.
- The rights of a child not to be separated from their parents.

The main principles driving current approaches should be:

- Children and their families have a right to participate in decisions affecting them.
- Safety and wellbeing of children is primarily the responsibility of their families who should be supported by communities and government.
- Australian society should value and work in partnership with parents, families, and others with responsibility for the care of children.

The Honourable Sharon Claydon MP, Member for Newcastle and Deputy Speaker introduced the keynote speaker. She expressed dismay that, in 2024, and in the face of numerous Royal Commissions, there continue to be operational concerns and negative impacts on families within our child protection systems. This includes not dealing adequately with forced removals of children, particularly First Nations' children, from their families and inadequate focus on restoration after removal and engagement with families in process. This led to her *introduction of the Keynote Speaker*, Aunty Deb Swan, who she acknowledged as part of an amazing group of grandmothers supporting families as they navigate the child protection system and lobby government and child protection agencies, while always looking to improve outcomes for First Nations children. Aunty Deb and other Grandmothers were acknowledged for doing the hard work of self-determination in child welfare and trying to find ways to ensure that policy development, thinking, and decision-making documents, at all levels, are informed by their lived experience and include better ways for the future.

Honourable Kate Washington, MP, Minister for Families and Communities | Minister for Disability Inclusion | Member for Port Stephens, was unable to attend. She sent a message in support of the Roundtable, read to the group at the start of the day. (Appendix 1)

3.3. Keynote Address

Aunty Deb Swan, Grandmothers Against Removal (GMAR NSW) spoke about the continuing disparities, challenges and poor practice and outcomes with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities in child protection and OOHC. She promoted the importance of persistence in challenging systems as part of ongoing efforts to safeguard the rights and interests of children. In Australia, Grandmother groups have held an important cultural leadership role in systems advocacy and with families, kin, and communities.

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Be hopeful, be optimistic.

Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year.

Our struggle is the struggle of life.

Never ever be afraid to make some noise.

</div>

Aunty Deb noted that the lack of progress by governments and systems administrators in responding to the needs of everyone adds to the anger and frustration of Aboriginal communities who experience entrenched, rational fears of child welfare intervention. These issues compound to reduce the likelihood of Aboriginal families seeking help when needed, engaging with services when offered, or developing relationships with workers.

Identified examples of issues and gaps in the current system:

- Inadequate practice.
- Unnecessary separations.
- Family members overlooked.
- Restoration not considered.
- Imposing unreasonable and ever-changing goals.
- Not providing basic supports for families.

What's needed?

- Preventing the need for statutory removal.
- Getting kids home in a safe and timely way.
- Activating broader family and community networks of care and support to wrap around children and families during periods of crisis.
- Promoting healing – contemporary systems continue to compound the trauma experienced by our families, sapping their energies and hope for the future.
- Working both within and outside of the systems and processes towards change.
- Court systems must take a stronger stance to hold statutory agencies to account for their practice and the decisions they impose on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- Advocating for our families.
- Contributing to the systems and practice change that is needed.

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

- Recognising the knowledge and expertise of our families and communities in understanding and addressing the challenges they face.

Aunty Deb pointed out that Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) have a role to play in elevating family voices, maintaining and strengthening connections, and reconnecting children and families to community and culture. They often have extensive knowledge of families, their stories, and their relationships across place and time. Through these networks, family members can be located and mobilised to support children and families, sharing knowledge, providing culturally grounded services and support, and contributing to that sense of belonging. Aunty Deb concluded that all families experiencing child protection and OOHC systems have similar challenges being seen and heard and that any work we do is about all children.

Honorary Associate Professor Nicola Ross provided an overview of current research literature about family inclusion, as outlined in Section 4. This overview provided a foundation for the purpose and focus of the Roundtable.

3.4. Table discussions

Table discussion groups were allocated questions (see Table 2) to consider policy and practice at all levels and asked to focus on a specific stage in the journey that a family experiences through child protection and OOHC systems and processes (see Table 3). A list of attendees by table allocation is in Appendix 2.

In addition to a focus on certain stages in a family's journey, two groups were allocated a 'governance and strategy' focus. This could potentially impact all families across journey stages and experiences. Considering and including family inclusion at a strategic organisational level is fundamental to changing policy and practice and, importantly, shifting values and cultures to optimise family engagement, participation, and power in their children's lives. This includes before, during, and after children's time in OOHC, and inclusive of prevention and both early and long-term intervention and support.

Table 2: Table discussion questions

PART ONE	*All tables*	Can we agree and endorse this family inclusion definition in-principle?
		What are 2-3 key gaps in family inclusion?
		Tables 1-9: Thinking about this in terms of the stage of a family's journey.
PART TWO	*Tables 1-9*	Name one existing practice/service that supports family inclusion? What more could be done to extend this?
		Name one new practice or service that could help to address identified gaps in practice. [legislation, policy, practice, services]
	Tables 10 & 11	How could people with lived experience assist parent and family engagement with services?
	Table 10	How do we raise community, organisational, and worker awareness of the value of children's, parents' and families' lived experience in contributing to decisions at all policy and practice levels in the child protection & OOHC?
	Table 11	How can services include parents and families in the design, evaluation and reform of programs (service training, strategic planning and service feedback) so their experience improves service focus and practice?
	All tables	Can we endorse this statement and intention to keep the momentum for family inclusion going?
	Individual	Are you interested in joining an alliance to keep the momentum for family inclusion?

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

Table 3: Discussion focus – stage and family

TABLE	PROCESS or JOURNEY STAGE	FOCUS
1	Prior to application to children's court	Issues for Aboriginal families
2	Prior to application to children's court	Issue for non-Aboriginal families
3	Legal proceedings on foot but children not removed yet	Issues for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families
4	Legal proceedings on foot but children not removed yet	Issues for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families
5	During Court/Just after removal	Issues for Aboriginal families
6	During Court/Just after removal	Issues for non-Aboriginal families
7	During Court/Just after removal	Issues for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families
8	Permanently placed in OOHC	Aboriginal families
9	Permanently placed in OOHC	Non-Aboriginal families
10	Governance & Strategy	All families
11	Governance & Strategy	All families

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

4. Family inclusion research literature

A summary list of the literature overview is in Table 4. A copy of the slide presentation is in Appendix 3.

Table 4: Summary overview of literature

Challenges experienced by children, parents, kin, and other stakeholders

- Power disparities and risk aversion silence children, parents, carers, and practitioners
- Removing children from families is associated with long term harm
- Family participation is linked positively with restoration
- Maintaining connections for children in permanent OOHC is important for their wellbeing
- Poverty and socio-economic factors increase risks of children going into OOHC
- Structural issues combine with substance use, mental health, and domestic violence
- Impact for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities
- Child removal may result in long term harms to families more broadly

Practice barriers to parent participation

- A focus on relational not legal permanence may improve the system
- Relationships with practitioners
- Exclusionary child protection practices
- Lack of culturally safe practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- Processes to support family participation may not be working

Promising approaches and new directions

- Family inclusion initiatives
- Responsive regulation prioritising parent and families in children's lives
- Parent and family participation supporting children in care
- Multi-disciplinary legal services
- Parent and family advocacy
- Policy advocacy by parents and families

5. Working definition of family inclusion

Table discussion groups considered the above question in relation to the working definition of family inclusion (Figure 1). Unanimous endorsement in-principle meant that the definition could be used to inform the work of the Roundtable for the day. Groups were also asked to provide comment, concerns, and ideas so that the definition could be refined as needed following the Roundtable. Their responses are outlined in the subsections below.

Figure 1: Working definition of family inclusion

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

All Roundtable participants supported the definition in-principle to guide their work in Roundtable discussions. Their feedback on the definition and ideas for improvement might inform other action that follows this Roundtable.

5.1. Feedback on definition

Common themes

- Family inclusion must be part of the process **from the outset**, across the whole sector, with support provided from the first interaction.
- Family members who are impacted by decisions need to be at the **centre of any intervention**, influencing and being part of decision-making processes.
- **Accountability** needs to be built in to rebalance power and included at all system levels, in legislation, and the whole journey with the family.

- Family inclusion must be embedded **across systems, not confined to child protection and out-of-home care** (for example, education, health, child and family), with family and community leadership as early as possible.
- The system/caseworkers/support services need to listen to families— their input needs to **underpin all decision making**.
- It has the right words: it's about **connection**.
- Clarity of communication is needed across all parts of the process.

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

Wording and concepts

Suggested amendments for clarity and strengthening included:

- Safety is missing in the definition: "active, **safe**, and meaningful" would be good.

- Safety is not just for the children: "improved outcomes for children **and parents/families**".

- It's important to recognise that **grandmothers and extended family** have a role as well as parents.

- **Children** need to be clearly included in the "family inclusion principle".

- Is **"participation"** a strong enough word?

- Should a "valuable role" be changed to **"integral role"**?

- First sentence needs to be more powerful.

- What do we mean by **policy and practice**? The **Western approach** is "you come into our system"—need to radically change the system's policy and practice (to a **"participant-focused" paradigm**) within the legal system where it must sit.

- Redraft the last sentence from a **rights perspective** not a risk paradigm—strengthen the right to be at home and within family.

- Last sentence is good. But rationale needs to be about the *why*.

- Perhaps specify that the aim is to **prevent permanent OOHC** and have the focus on **"restoration"** rather than "removal".

- **"Family-led decision making"** versus "family inclusion": the difference is in how this is done in practice/reality.

- Including **"culture, identity and wellbeing"** in the second statement may make the definition more inclusive of Aboriginal children and families.

- Can the **"strengths-based" approach to decisions** (as opposed to the existing deficit model) be more clearly defined? Recognising and basing decisions on strengths is a vital change of focus for improved outcomes.

- Focus on **strengthening the family's meaningful participation** over the family being "given" power – acknowledging the family's existing innate power. In the current process, parents and families don't have power unless it is (rarely) "given" by the system.

- The key words are **"active strengths and meaningful empowerment"**.

- Needs to include **"accountability"**.

- Family inclusion is an important principle and is **broader than child protection** as it is used in health and education for example.

- The definition is quite long and a "bit hard to make out". Perhaps think about the **accessibility** of the definition and consider **cutting it down**.

- This definition aligns with what FISH uses.

Other considerations

- **Cohesive decision making** is hard, but must be attempted, even if not always possible.

- Rather than having an institutional agenda, the focus needs to be about **partnering-as-equals** to prevent future removal of children.

- If it's in the **law**, there should be **consequences** for breaking it.

- Further discussion and unpacking for **Aboriginal communities** may require a **separate definition**.

- **Family and kin** know their children best—they need to be setting the agenda based on what matters to them.

- Family inclusion is **complex** due to the nature of OOHC, due to children usually being spread across agencies and services.

6. Gaps and issues in practice and services

> Question 2: What are 2-3 key gaps in family inclusion?

There were a range of concerns about support, services, and the system across table discussions during the Roundtable. Groups commonly identified significant, often systemic, barriers at the various stages of a family's journey, from before removal to after children were restored and returned home. Some fundamental influences on the gaps and concerns included how 'family' is defined, shortcomings in including family, and patchy or absent practice and value frameworks that appropriately and effectively acknowledge parents' and families' agency, such as their ability to engage in, and lead, decisions about their children. Presented below are table group responses about gaps and issues in services, as summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Gaps and issues in services (summary)

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

6.1. Recognition and understanding of family

- The state is only ever an institutional service; it is never a "family". Removing parental rights does not stop parents being the family.

- Fear drives family and community seeking help and their reactions to help.

- The family is excluded.

- Grandparents and, often, fathers, are left out of the conversations.

- There is ignorance at an agency level of parents' agency, i.e., their ability to participate in effective decision making in relation to their own circumstances.

- Definition of 'family' is a narrow focus. For example:
  - A focus only on the mother with little involvement of the paternal family.
  - Fathers can be invisible in this process – need for awareness of this.
  - Paternal grandparents are not generally considered as a potential substitute family. This should be a real option, not a second thought.
  - The extended family is involved very late in the process.

- There are many biases underpinning current practice. A particular bias is around the concept of "purposeful parental neglect".
  - In the greater number of cases of seeming "purposeful parental neglect", parents are often doing the best they can for their children within their resources and understanding. There is usually something other than deliberate neglect that is underpinning a behaviour or a series of behaviours that the system sees as outright neglect.
  - That can become a serious bias influencing the decision for removal. Deeper investigation and communication could help address this before removal becomes the only solution.

6.2. Culturally appropriate services

- The definition of "family" in law is often that of the Western nuclear family rather than being culturally sensitive.

- There is a lack of understanding around Aboriginal communities and families.

- Aboriginal approaches are not implemented in families which have children with different cultural roots.

- The sector is not inclusive of and/or able to work with complex or different family structures or children with different cultural roots in one family unit.

- Language barriers exist when communicating with Aboriginal families, highlighting the need for using friendly language to ensure families feel safe in communicating.

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

6.3. Communication and information

- The whole communication process needs to be more open.

- Families' issues and concerns are not always communicated or easy to communicate. Many parents need assistance/advocacy support to communicate their situation.

- Relevant information is not accessible to parents and families.

- Families do not know where their children are and are not given opportunity for input into their children's care because they are deemed unsafe. This is based on a deficit view of parent rights rather than the strengths of family bonds.

- Children are not asked for their opinions and preferences: there is a need to consider what they want/need.

- There's a lack of information sharing between DCJ and NGOs

- Information sharing across the family and agencies is prevented based on privacy laws, but in family inclusion and decision making, information sharing may be more important than the need for privacy.

6.4. Building relationships in the sector

- Realistic and workable relationships between parents, cares, and workers are not being built from the beginning.

- Carers and families are kept separate and isolated.

- One personal observation: "No one trusts anyone in child protection at all levels."

- Confusing and often conflicting communication between people in children's lives about what's happening, e.g., service-service; service/DCJ-families-carers.

- Providers appear averse to contacting families due to risk and families' perceived deficits.

6.5. Governance and measuring impact

- The system has built an environment of low trust and high risk. Processes are created around managing risks.

- Parameters to measure effectiveness and governance of risk need to change. Risk performance frameworks in Australia/New South Wales are framed around our understandings of "good" and "bad" parents—need to reframe what is best for children.

- While there is legislation requiring inclusivity, there is a lack of understanding of how to be inclusive.

- There is no established process for collecting and analysing data to measure the impacts of family inclusion decisions.

- There are gaps in the available data, in particular court data, for analysis of effectiveness of intervention decisions.

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

6.6. System and funding issues

- Practitioners within the system cannot always go outside the norm of the workplace to effectively implement family inclusion principles.
    - Effective family inclusion takes time and mental energy–it is a more demanding process than merely following an inflexible protocol.

- Currently there is more support for foster carers than for actual families.
- There's a lack of capacity across the board.
- DCJ gatekeepers determine who gets the services.
- There are conflicting responsibilities across DCJ caseworkers.

- Parent support services are not funded to provide ongoing support and advocacy after removal.
- There is no financial assistance for informal carers within the existing process–this is a huge gap that government could address.

- Currently DCJ (who removed the children) does not work with the family and parents after removal, leaving them with no available services or support.
- Working within policy and prescribed practice is often an issue for frontline and service delivery.

- Being realistic: while there is no point talking about things that aren't implementable or actionable, it is vital to explore any barriers like lack of resources, which may be able to be addressed. The system needs to be flexible enough to allow for this.

7. Existing practices and services supporting family inclusion

> Question 3: Name one existing practice/service that supports family inclusion? What more could be done to extend this?

Very few existing services were identified that support family inclusion. The three listed by one or more table discussion groups were:

- Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter (FISH)
- Grandmothers Against Removal NSW (GMAR)
- Winha-nga-nha List at Dubbo Children's Court

Each of these support and advocate with parents, families, and communities as they try to navigate complicated systems and processes to meet the needs and rights of their children. Several discussion groups suggested the expansion and extension of those initiatives, e.g., across NSW, and in service size/capacity.

Notably, in response to this question, table discussion groups did not identify *elements* of other existing services that they would connect with family inclusion. For example, is there

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

an element of DCJ or funded service practice that is consistent with the definition of family inclusion? This does not necessarily mean those elements do not exist. They may need to be experienced by more people to be more known, or better explained in their descriptions.

The absence of other suggestions in the Roundtable also potentially highlights the importance of creating an agreed definition of family inclusion that is, in turn, widely circulated for services and practitioners to consider how their work fits with the definition and how they can do better in family inclusion.

8. Suggested practices or services to address gaps

> Question 4: Name one new practice or service that could help to address identified gaps in practice. [legislation, policy, practice, services]

Throughout the Roundtable, table groups suggested an extensive range of ways to improve services and programs that could embed family inclusion as a standard and ethical principle for practice with families across all points of their journey through child protection and OOHC. The responses are listed below, both those applicable across the journey as well as some suggestions more specifically related to culturally appropriate services, early intervention, post-removal, restoration, and governance.

8.1. Across a family's journey

The Roundtable identified numerous elements of this journey where there could be improvements at all levels and across communities, summarised in Figure 3 with more detail from groups provided below.

Figure 3: Ideas to address gaps – across a family's journey (summary)

Promoting family safety

- All practitioners need to approach family inclusion processes from a trauma-informed perspective.

- Acknowledge the impact of family fear on their help seeking and engagement.

- Need to establish safety for families so that they are comfortable and able to participate actively and effectively and feel safe enough to ask for help

- There is a need for connection and empathy. Connection and moving past fear are based in establishing empathy with the family.

Strengthening and repairing relationships

- Focus should be on child-in-family: Being family focused means the child benefits.

- Extend family support by developing relationships between foster carers and families.

- Focus on "repair work" within system relationships.

Acknowledging parent and family agency

- Include parents with lived experience to inform all parts of the process: in mental health and, particularly, disability there is better acknowledgement and use of lived experience.
- Involving parents means that they need to be involved in decision making that impacts them and their children.
- Parents' choices need to be respected and upheld wherever possible.
- Need to recognise the diverse complexities of parents' roles.

Purposeful communication and information

- There needs to be much more emphasis on having prior information regarding support available for parents prior to issues manifesting.
- Need transparent communication between all parties and need to avoid jargon.
- Improve communication: There are many resources available that could be contextualised to work around gaps.

Constructive funding, design, and system features

- We need to encourage flexibility and out-of-the-box thinking in terms of funding and program design.
- Allocation of resources needs to change, with more resources allocated to early intervention and support, and funding participation of those with lived experience.
- Services including housing, domestic violence support, and mental health support need to be integrated into the process, rather than only available in isolation.
- There is a need for consistent legal representation starting early.
- Seek temporary carers' agreement to include parental supervision.

Tracking and improving family inclusion

- Establish simple guiding statements in a scorecard format. For example, develop simple statements of what family inclusion looks like for an organisation, for a manager, for a practitioner, and for the family, so that each agent has a clear picture – and a measure – for what they should be doing.
    - The scorecard could include processes for connecting to existing resources.
    - An alliance of organisations, families and communities could look at how to use those different resources and could be instrumental in developing resources that can be used by different organisations in different parts of the system.

8.2. Culturally appropriate services

- Early intervention services need to be led by Aboriginal community groups, not DCJ.
- There needs to be a facility to allow self-referrals.
- Use friendly and accessible language with Aboriginal families.
- Ensure cultural safety during the process – make sure the family feels safe.
- Work with Aboriginal communities' needs to avoid imposing certain external solutions.
- Take information into communities and give them genuine opportunities.
- When asking for ideas from communities, actually use the ideas.

8.3. Early Intervention stage

Connections and attachments

- Early intervention may help prevent removal, creating attachment at community level and involving the whole community early on.
- There is a need for healthy connection and connection beyond the immediate family. It is the lifelong connections that are important to young people. While they may not be someone the child can live with, they are people who will play an ongoing role in their lives. These people may also act as family advocates.

Family-focus versus worker-focus

- Be family focused rather than focused on what the worker needs to do.
- Communicate with people in their home.
- Change the focus of case management to restoration, making that the absolute goal.
- Rename case workers/managers as restoration workers/managers.

Community- and family-led initiatives

- Create a separate family-led organisation staffed by real advocates for parents and children to help families who fear the system to interact with it effectively and not from that position of fear.
- Develop and fund community-led early intervention services (rather than led by DCJ).
- Extend on existing practice by establishing independently facilitated family meetings.
- Family meetings need to be prioritised and external to DCJ, where safety plans can be determined by the family and supported by DCJ and where parents can focus on addressing concerns and be actively supported throughout the process.
- Consider establishing/referring to local advisory groups to run family meetings, or let community members, elected Elders, support the family. They will agree on safety elements needed and assist in developing agreed actions to provide to DCJ;

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle 2024

- Our elected Aboriginal Elders and community members generally participate in these processes without any reimbursement for their time and input, and for undertaking activity that often involves revisiting their own trauma.
- These advisory groups need to be funded for this activity and their time.

> If family meetings were more proactively encouraged and supported with the family, where the family actually understands what it is and how it can help, how they can determine placement decisions and create a safety plan tailored for and by the family – as the experts in their own lives – it might have greater traction and remove the need for ANY statutory intervention in the majority of cases.

8.4. System changes and resources

- Release a new practice note similar to Practice Note 17 (for post-removal) to allow the voice of parents and advocates to be heard by the courts prior to removal in an early intervention space.
- Increase the family voice on decision-making panels looking at safeguarding children.
- Develop clear definitions and a "scorecard" model (see above).
  - Create and use a sampling process to ensure good outcomes are being achieved.

- Use existing resources more effectively.
- Allocate more competent resources towards early intervention efforts.
- Primary community organisations being family inclusive. Expand organisations, i.e., health and education talking to families about available supports.
- Implement broader family supports for children. For example, involving grandparents to help make children feel safe when first taken into care.

Place-based solutions

- Develop place-based solutions for how family and child advocacy look in each location and methods to engage with families early, recognising that in early stages you walk *beside* families.
  - Good advocacy eventually becomes standing *behind* families because you know you have built their self-belief enabling them to advocate for themselves.
  - A key part of this is creating space in court for recognition of advocates so they are not silenced or ignored and can genuinely advocate for family/parent/child.
- Effectively mobilising all existing services, structures, and institutions already in place to better support those who need help before the situation escalates.

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

Diversionary programs

- Develop a diversion program to stop kids getting into court in the first place:

  - A co-designed service model, state-wide, and consistent rather than a pilot project.
  - An integrated wraparound service, with automatic referrals to independent community-based support for families that are at risk of having children removed.
  - Service independent of DCJ.
  - Better tailored to specific and unique family needs.
  - Account for race, religion, disability, etc.
  - Based in communities.
  - Not time limited: it will continue as long as needed.
  - Relational: including families and led by families including the wider, extended family and people who are regarded as family.
  - This process could have a healing and therapeutic effect and deal with the grief, trauma, and counselling needs of the family (including the broader family).

- Include support services to address identified needs from the very beginning. For example:

  - support before a child goes to school and problems start to be noticed, including support to navigate issues well before a child is a little bit disruptive in class, or when parents need to work late, or a child or parent enters a health system.
  - systems outside child protection and OOHC systems working in collaboration with CP and OOHC and DCJ before removal becomes the main solution.
  - information and support available well before the moment a child enters into care or a mandatory report is submitted.

8.5. Post-removal

- Accountability to share information with parents and meet their support needs to be built into the process to commence immediately on removal.

- Parent liaison support needs to be independent and commence as soon as a child is removed. There needs to be a parent advocate.

  - They can offer practical, emotional, and crisis support.
  - They should be available to the parent right up to establishment phase, e.g., making sure the parent gets to court, having access to some flexible funds to provide food and clothing for the parent, holding the parent in the safe space during that period.

- Establish a panel of practitioners to help parents during post-removal.

- Consider what follow-up is available for young people taken out of home once they reach 18 years of age.

8.6. Restoration

- Providing parents with access to a family restoration clinic where they can get information (independent from their DCJ caseworker) about how to get their child back.
    - The clinic can refer parents to services and give them information about services that might be able to help them.
- Parents have access to advocacy after restoration if new child protection concerns arise and further intervention is implemented (case management and/or legal).

8.7. Governance

- The voices of parents and family are necessary in establishing governance. For example, advisory groups need to have parent and family representation.
- The voices of lived experience need to be heard in governance but through what mechanism? How would that work?
- Start with a vision and mission when developing an agency board.
- Family inclusion needs to be in the organisation's key focus of governance.

9. Lived experience support for family engagement

Question 5: How could people with lived experience assist parent and family engagement with services?

Across the day's discussions there were views and ideas relevant to this question, as shown in some responses above around existing services that are family inclusive and suggested practice and service ideas.

Points made with direct reference to this question were:

- Identifying and partnering with people, including extended family, means identifying *who and what family is for every child in their respective communities*.
- Explore all the avenues for connection, input, and support for children that are currently omitted and look for the roles that they might play in the care process.

10. Raising awareness for valuing lived experience

> Question 6: How do we raise community, organisational, and worker awareness of the value of children's, parents' and families' lived experience in contributing to decisions at all policy and practice levels in the child protection & OOHC?

> The standout position from the Roundtable about this question was the importance of family inclusion being understood as an ethical practice, the importance of leading change "from the top", and that a culture of family inclusion should be visible and experienced from the first moment families have contact with child protection and OOHC systems.

Points provided by discussion groups on this question were:

- Family participation is good and important in and of itself.
    - It's an ethical thing to do.
    - We know family participation leads to better outcomes, but we should be doing it because it is intrinsically the right thing to do.

- It is vital to create a family inclusion culture from the beginning of families' journeys

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

- While we have excellent ideas around the concept of family inclusion, these ideas and the concept need to be built into all relevant governance documents, strategic plans, mission statements, and into how processes are developed.
    - We need a family-participation focused model for governance and decision making across the board that includes a capacity for local voices to shape local approaches.

- Change needs to be supported and driven from the top, to be integrated across the system.
    - Those at the top need to listen to and act on advice from all voices in the sector.
    - Leadership is where the concept of family inclusion needs to be embraced and become the focus.
    - Real systemic and governance change needs to be driven by our leadership.

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

11. Family inclusion in design, evaluation, and reform

> Question 7: How can services include parents and families in the design, evaluation and reform of programs (service training, strategic planning and service feedback) so their experience improves service focus and practice?

> Across other responses, there was recognition from the various table discussion groups of the importance of families being the central focus of, and advisers for, family inclusive policy and practice.

Responses outlined above about governance and leadership also linked to this question which suggests that family inclusion is both a process and an outcome.

Coupled with responses in other sections, groups considered the following important:

- We need to equip those on the frontline with children and with families in different ways to humanise these families who are so demonised in society because they may not necessarily have the tools, resources, or coping mechanisms to provide what we have historically mandated as appropriate care for a child. We need to enable and support them to put appropriate support in place earlier.
- Need to write policies to support the work that we want to see happen on the ground and that is framed around family inclusion assumptions.
- Start with the base premise or paradigm of integrating empathy in practice in the first place to facilitate change in practice across government and non-government organisations.
- Meet and work with families where they're at.
- Encompass everyone and anyone who could be family for the child in question.

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024

12. Maintaining momentum

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

12.1. Endorsing a statement about family inclusion

> Question 8: Can we endorse the following statement and intention to keep the momentum for family inclusion going?

The following statement for an overarching statement to support and promote family inclusion was presented to the Roundtable for endorsement. There was unanimous support, while acknowledging revisions that may come from other actions following the Roundtable.

> The evidence shows that current policy settings and practices within the child protection and out of home care systems undermine the parent and family role in children's lives and damage the ongoing connections that children need with their parents and families. This can be addressed through family inclusion. Family inclusion is the active and meaningful participation by children, parents, family and kin in child protection and out-of-home care processes at a policy and practice level, so that children remain meaningfully connected to their families. Through family inclusion, children experience active and meaningful family participation in their lives, that strengthen their connections and family relationships. Family inclusion is linked to improved outcomes for children including prevention, restoration, and relational permanence.

12.2. Strengthening alliances for family inclusion

> Question 9: Are you interested in joining an alliance to keep the momentum for family inclusion?

Central to the actions promoted by the Roundtable and the lived experiences and research that have informed progress in family inclusion so far, is continuing to build existing alliances already formed by family inclusion organisations, especially FISH and GMARNSW.

They should continue to be comprised of families, researchers, practitioners, and organisations committed to embedding family inclusion as an ethical principle that is part of child protection and OOHC culture, leadership, and practice and at all levels and across communities.

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

Roundtable participants were presented with the idea of participating in an alliance to promote family inclusion to:

i)   maintain a register of relevant family inclusion research, beginning with the roundtable research and outcomes, and encourage further research.

ii) advocate for system reform and service development that further family inclusion in practice.

Initial interest would be coordinated by the organising team of the roundtable at the University of Newcastle, with invitations to participate forwarded to all who attended the roundtable, and then details provided to FISH.

A full report and actions will be circulated within 3 months of the roundtable. Decisions about the structure of an alliance and the use of roundtable materials will be agreed by people and groups who take responsibility for Roundtable follow p and the next steps.

Participants accessed a QR Code to register interest in being part of an alliance of people committed to family inclusion. There are currently 27 people registered.

[End of report]

Appendix 1: Message from the Honourable Kate Washington, MP

Minister for Families and Communities | Minister for Disability Inclusion | Member for Port Stephens

The Hon Kate Washington MP
Minister for Families and Communities
Minister for Disability Inclusion

Statement from the Hon Kate Washington MP
Family Inclusion Roundtable

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the family inclusion roundtable, and I'm sorry I can't be with you today.

I understand this is the first event of its kind, bringing together people with lived experience, researchers, NGOs including Aboriginal organisations, and government to discuss how family inclusion can improve outcomes for kids.

We know that collaborating with parents and family helps keep children safe and improves their long-term outcomes. Their voices and experiences are critical to building a better child protection system.

Connections with family, community and culture are vital for kids because these relationships will form part of their support network as adults, helping them understand who they are and where they're from.

We all know that it takes a village to raise a child. Supporting and empowering families, and the community around a child builds strength and resilience, and reduces the need for statutory child protection. It makes a lot of sense.

I am pleased to know that you will be discussing new and innovative forms of family inclusive practice in your meeting today. As our government embarks on significant structural reform of the child protection system, we are keen to consider innovative approaches. Because status quo is not an option.

So I am very keen to have conversations about family inclusion to improve our child protection system and make it more responsive to the needs and expectations of families and the community.

I acknowledge Nicola Ross and her team, the organisers, and everyone who has worked so hard to have important voices heard by important people in the sector.

I hope you have a productive meeting and I look forward to meeting with Nicola and her team to learn about the outcomes from today.

Sincerely,

Kate Washington MP
Minister for Families and Communities
Minister for Disability Inclusion

23 / 4 / 2024

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2024

Appendix 2: Attendees by table

Table 1	Table 2	Table 3
Olivia Clarke (student)	Suzi Pawley	Deb Swan
Lauren Stracey	Katie Kelso	Sue Hellier
Kimberly Chiswell	Lyn Stoker	Karen Menzies
Lara Turley	Rob Ryan	Rachel Evans
Joshua Cullen	Geneve Belcher (student)	Jessica Smith
Eleanor Swan	Linda Smith	Nivya Abram (student)
	Belinda Edwards	Kate Alexander

Table 4	Table 5	Table 6
Tammy Prince-Doyle	Penny Hood	Tamara Blakemore
Susan Collings	Vicki Trigas	Sharnae Selvage
Emily Oftner	Zoe De Re	Kelly-Lee Goodchild
Kate Warner	Paul Gray	Molly Fairleigh
Kenn Clift	Casey Blackstock	Tracey Sheedy
		Meredith McLaine
		Carey Pearson

Table 7	Table 8	Table 9
Shantelle Common	Natasha Huard	Claire Walker
Simone Dean	Shari Bailey	Marie New
Nicola Ross	Sally King	Alice Truswell
Margaret Spencer	Erin Meagher	Alicia Pigot
William Van Trump	Taliya-Via Tuiono	Sharna Milgate
David Allen	Sally King	Lucy Myers
	Briana Jurgeit	Loren Dumbrell
	Aleisha Herbert	

Table 10	Table 11
Maree Walk	Anna Maria Hanna
Susan Watson	Amanda Moon
Tom Mc Clean	Lou Johnston
Sally Cowling	Ben Spence
Jessica Cocks	Steve Kinmond
Angela (student)	
Cara Vivian	

Appendix 3: Overview of literature (slides)

Copies of slides presented by Honorary Associate Professor Nicola Ross. Also see summary list in Table 4.
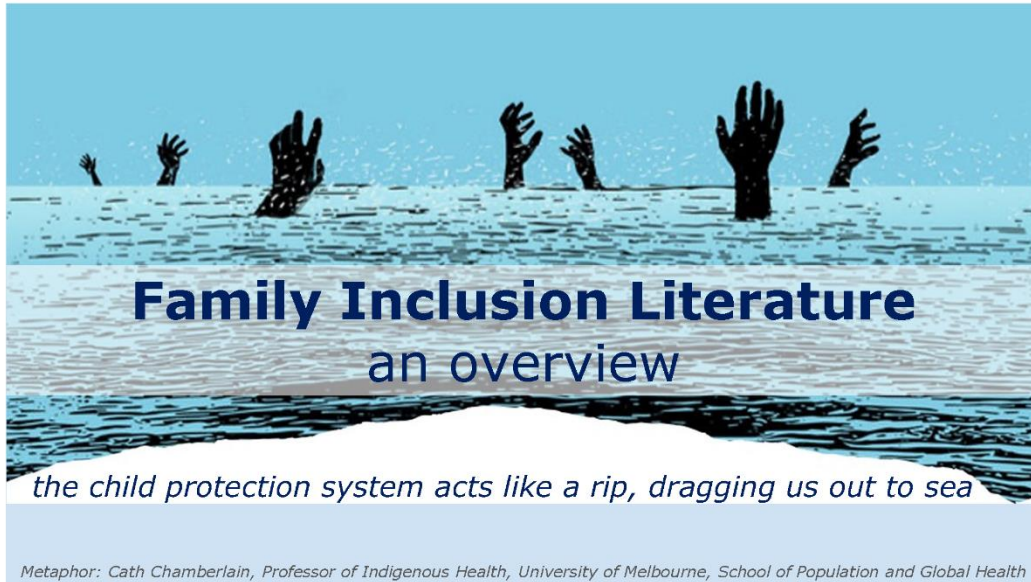
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2

Challenges experienced by children, parents, kin and other stakeholders

- Adversarial investigatory approaches, underpinned by deficit-based frameworks.

- Removal decisions are based on predicting future risk of child maltreatment rather than assessing what support the family needs now, and who is best to provide support so children are safe.

- Child protection intervention targets multiple generations of families.

- Child protection intervention is linked to varioius long-term harms.

3

Removing children is associated with long term harm

Living in out-of-home care increases risks of:

- Mental health diagnosis

- Criminal Justice involvement

- Lower life expectancy

- Impacted educational performance

- Substance abuse

- Removal of future children

- Limited employment opportunities

4

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Family participation is linked positively with restoration

Restoration rates across Australia range from the lowest rate of 9% in New South Wales to 33% in Victoria.	Rates are historically lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
40% of children had only one, or no substantiated risk of significant harm report prior to removal.	High rates of permanent removal and low rates of restoration may also fuel distrust in families, who may avoid seeking help.

5

Power disparities and risk aversion are silencing

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up 42% of children in out-of-home care.

- Parents describe the system as punitive, blaming and stigmatising.

- Kinship and foster carers experience systemic challenges, are not heard, and excluded from decisions about children.

- Workers on the front line are silenced by authorities.

- Children and young people feel unheard about their wish to live with and retain connections with their siblings.

6

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The importance of connections in OOHC

- Many young people leave foster or residential care to return to parents or other family.
- Young people in care regularly report they want more time with family.
- Leaving care with quality family relationships means better long-term outcomes.
- Young people have stronger cultural connections if facilitated through and by their family, kin and community.

7

Impacts of poverty and socioeconomic factors on children going into OOHC

Intergenerational socio-economic factors which increase the risk of children going into OOHC include:
- Poverty
- Access to housing
- Intergenerational trauma

'Collateral consequences' of child removal can include:
- Poverty, e.g. removal of Centrelink benefits
- Homelessness

Sole parenthood and unemployment in Australia are closely linked to:
- Poverty
- Child protection involvement
- Reduced likelihood of restoration

8

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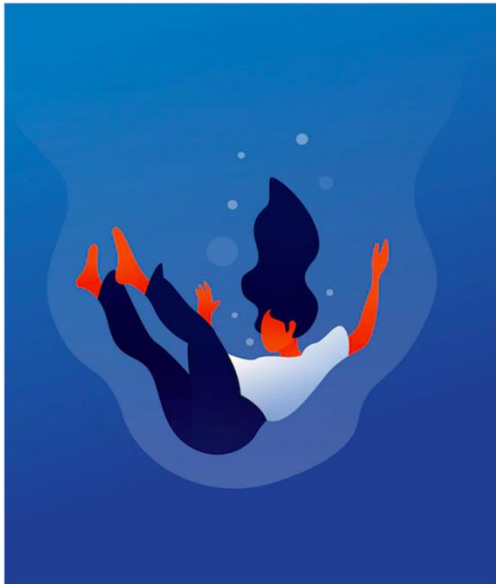
Structural issues combine with substance use, mental health and domestic violence

- Drugs and alcohol or mental illness combined with broader social structural factors may contribute to child removal.
- Families experiencing domestic violence are more likely to come to the attention of child protection agencies.
- 'Failure to protect' policies and mother blaming practices:
    - fail to support victimised women's attempts to mother in difficult circumstances
    - expect women to stop men's violence
    - create barriers to restoration

9

Impacts for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities

- 10 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be in OOHC
- 6 times more likely to be subject to child protection investigations
- Less likely to be supported to return home
- Oppressive practices continue the intergenerational transmission of trauma

10

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Child removal may result in long term harms to families more broadly

- Child removal is linked to
    - Worsening homelessness
    - Poverty
    - Parental distress
    - Additional removals
- Over reporting of Aboriginal families.
- Higher mortality rates of parents who experience removal of their children.

11

Practice barriers to parent participation

- Family inclusion is not a fundamental principle of the child protection and OOHC sector.
- Attachment theory is used to perpetuate ongoing settler-colonial policies of dominance and intentional harm.
- Trauma discourse is weaponised to justify child protection intervention.
- Quality of implementation does not always match rhetorical aims.

12

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A focus on
relational permanence

- Relational permanence is how children feel, their sense of belonging, their strength, and their relationships.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders have called for a more culturally relevant understanding of permanency.

- The goal to find a 'forever family' overrides Aboriginal children's rights to maintain culture.

13

Relationships with practitioners

- Positive relationships with child protection practitioners are linked to improved parent participation.

- The practitioners relationship with families is a key tool for helping families improve parenting and build safety for children.

- A lack of trust in the system risks parents being perceived as 'uncooperative' and removal of their children.

14

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ROUNDTABLE
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2024
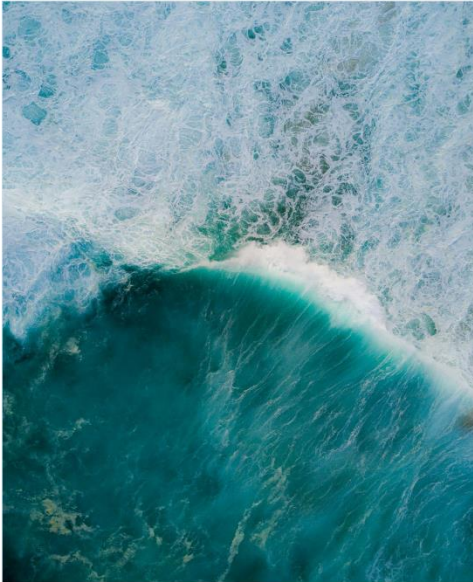
Exclusionary child protection practices

- Parents have described cruelty and disregard from practitioners in their interactions with services.
- Parents are often denied help to keep children safely at home or to be reunified with their children.
- Parents and families are powerless to influence the system.

15

Lack of culturally safe practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

Low levels of cultural competence in the child protection workforce

Profound lack of accountability and subsequent failures implementing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle

Significant barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities participating in processes

16

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Processes to support family participation may not be working

- Case conferences have not achieved improvements.
- Family group conferencing evaluations have been equivocal.
- Inconsistent practices and planning in family group conferencing.
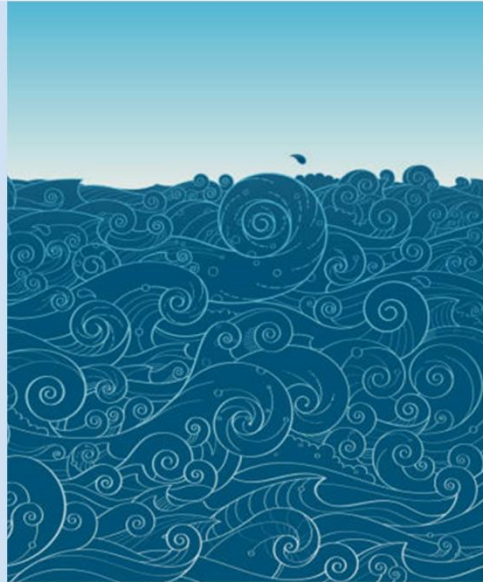
17

Promising approaches and new directions

- Family inclusion is essential for achieving better outcomes.
- Emerging practice must be integrated into legislation.
- Examples of emerging practice are:
    - parent and family advocacy
    - multidisciplinary legal services
    - family inclusive practices in OOHC.

18

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2024
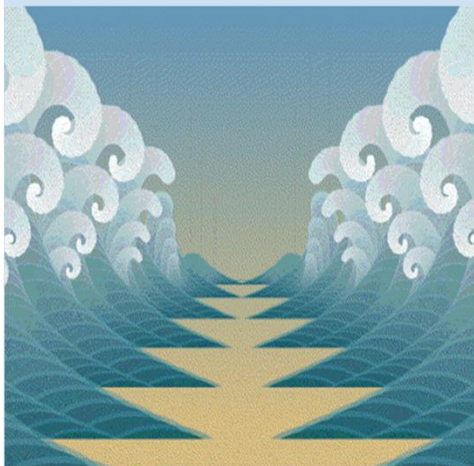
Family inclusion initiatives

- **Three areas of practice that address powerlessness and improve participation**

  - Improved relationships between families, workers, and carers

  - Ensuring families have access to information and resources

  - Support to participate in decisions through advocacy and mentoring

- **Address the social structural causes of harm to children**

- **Reconceptualise parents as leaders and agents of change**

19

Responsive regulation prioritising parents and families in children's lives

- Working together to empower parents and families to push back against oppression.

- Informal networks of support.

- Reforms that include parents and families in all aspects of the system are more likely to uphold objectives such as ensuring children are supported to live at home.

20

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Parent and family participation supporting children in care

- Foster and kinship carers play a key role in facilitating parent and family participation.

- When families are relieved from chronic daily stresses, they can focus on their children's needs.

- Increasing income and improving housing creates better outcomes for families.

21

Multi-disciplinary legal services

- Delivered by specialist lawyers, social workers, and parent advocates.

- Linked to prevention, restoration & kinship care.

- Plays an important role in preventing removal and hastening restoration.

22

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2024

Parent and Family Advocacy

- Parents with experiences of child protection support families to navigate child protection processes.

- Positive implications for restoration and parent participation.

23

Policy advocacy by parents and families

- Community, program, and systems levels.
- Parents and families use their lived experience expertise to participate in policy and program reform and development.
- Little evidence yet about the effectiveness of parent and family advocacy at a community or systems level.

24

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
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2024

Conclusion

- A long way to go to reform child protection to align with family inclusion.
- Developing family inclusion needs to centralise experiences of children, parents and kin.
- Family inclusive policy needs to be developed.
- NGOs and government agencies need to embed family inclusion.
- Family inclusion approaches need to be sensitive and responsive to domestic and family violence as well as racism and institutional harm.
- Stakeholders in child protection and out-of-home care have invaluable knowledge that needs to be harnessed.

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30

FAMILY INCLUSION
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newcastle
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34

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36

FAMILY INCLUSION
ROUNDTABLE
newcastle
2024