James Martin Institute for Public Policy

AT A GLANCE

Supporting children and families to flourish

Putting human relationships at the centre of transformational reform of the child protection and out-of-home care system in NSW

JMI Collaborative Project | August 2024

Headlines

- **In NSW, we are struggling to create the loving, nurturing relationships for all children that we know they need to thrive**. This report – the product of extensive collaboration with many experts from academia, government and the wider world of practice – responds to this challenge.

- **Despite waves of reform and genuine effort by many dedicated people, the status quo has been difficult to disrupt.** There are deeply ingrained mindsets and practices in the child protection and out-of-home care system.

- **Transformative change requires four major shifts:** an imperative embedded throughout the system to walk alongside families and create love and hope for children; time and energy to be relentlessly focused on that imperative; a reframing of risk; and measurement of what families actually feel about their experience of the system and the support they receive.

- **A relational approach focused on human-centric practices offers a way forward.** This approach emphasises listening and developing trust, as well as providing trauma-informed, tailored and holistic care to children and their families as agents of change. It aims to create the conditions for families to develop their capabilities and take charge of their own futures.

- **To advance this alternative, this report articulates 11 key opportunities.** It seizes a window of opportunity to reorient the focus of the system towards the holistic needs of children by empowering the families and communities who wrap around them.

Download the full report

The **full report** is available for download on **jmi.org.au**

Components of a future relational system: 11 opportunities for change

A public health approach provides **support for families at all stages** of their journey, not just at the point of crisis.

While embedding a **public health approach**, the system needs to have relationships at its core in order to truly operate in service of children, families and communities and their holistic wellbeing.

To support this shift, **system enablers must be reorientated** to centre meaningfully on connection, trust, empowerment and innovation to ensure that a new relational vision is embedded at all levels of the system.

Relational early help and universal support for all families

Voluntary and place-based relational support for families that are struggling

Acute relational and holistic care for children in OOHC

1 Establish a shared commitment to children, families and their communities in NSW - a new social compact

2 Establish strong leadership and governance for sector cultural transformation

3 Strengthen social infrastructure for children and families through investment in place-based, community-driven supports

4 **Legislative reform** that promotes positive relationships and family wellbeing

5 **Regulatory culture** that enables relationships and provides accountability

6 **An empowered workforce** with the right time and incentives to engage in relational practice

7 **Collaborative community-led commissioning** incentivising whole-of-family support and real human care

8 **A sustainable investment strategy** to support a whole-of-family model of care

9 **Measurement** of the experience of families and carers

10 **Valued foster carers** supported to build meaningful relationships with children and families

11 **Innovative court practices** that support a relational approach

The importance of relationships for a child and family support system: 5 Facts

1 **FOR ALL OF US**

People with stronger social relationships had a 50% increased likelihood of survival than those with weaker social relationships.

2 **FOR CHILDREN GROWING UP**

Positive relationships are critical for healthy childhood development and learning.

3 **FOR CHILDREN IN CARE**

Positive childhood experiences can be a protective factor against experiences which may otherwise create relational trauma.

4 **FOR BUILDING TRUST WITH SUPPORTIVE SERVICES**

Trusted relationships are key to engagement. For people experiencing multiple disadvantages, "the way in which people are supported may be more important than what is being delivered" and trusted relationships are key to engagement.

5 **FOR EFFECTIVE AND SUSTAINABLE GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS**

There is emerging evidence to support the systemic benefits of a "relational state", centred on building trust, decentralised capability-building and backing innovation.

The **full report** includes references for these facts (see page 11)

What is a relational approach?

A "relational approach" means meeting children and families where they are at and actively recognising the importance of relationships with and for them. This can be contrasted with traditional approaches.

For children, young people, their families and communities

Traditional approaches	In a relational system
Support for a child is viewed through the lens of managing or reducing risks to their physical safety, including maltreatment and risky behaviour.	Support for a child centres their connections, understands their past, and focuses on building greater connection and capability - with a reduction in risks as a result of this holistic approach.
Children in out-of-home care have somewhere to live and resources are provided for appropriate services.	Therapeutic care integrates meaningful relationships that set up children for a lifelong sense of connectedness and purpose.
Support for families focuses on identifying problems that can be fixed - families don't have a strong sense of power or agency in catalysing change.	Families are empowered and have a clear sense of agency in the types of supports that would be helpful for them, including designing and measuring these supports.

The **full report** includes a detailed overview of the differences between traditional approaches and a relational approach for various stakeholders, including:

For frontline workers

For carers

For services and organisations

At the system level

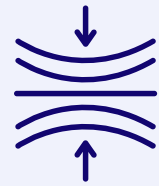# Design principles for a truly relational child and family system

1

Holistic wellbeing
The holistic wellbeing of children should be placed at the heart of all decisions, and the perspective and story of the child valued at every stage of their care journey.

2

Reciprocity & equality
The system should enable relationships that have a sense of reciprocity and equality, and create a sense of belonging for children.

3

Reflective system
The system should be reflective, recognising historical harms and actively resetting ongoing power imbalances, to focus on genuine support and healing, especially for First Nations families.

4

Incentives for capability building
The system should enable and incentivise services and organisations to walk with families and build the capabilities of family members to have agency over their own future.

5

Empowerment of workers
Workers and carers should be empowered to use their creativity, judgement, skills and time to build trust with children and families and support them to flourish.

6

Risk redefined
The needs and aspirations of children and families – the risks to their holistic wellbeing – should be prioritised over system-driven monitoring, investigating or administering of risk.

7

First Nations agency and community control
The system should amplify First Nations agency and strengthen mechanisms for community control, especially to deliver culturally-informed, relationship-based family preservation and restoration.

8

Experimentation & innovation
The system should actively create room and possibilities for experimentation and innovation that responds to local circumstances.

9

Family experiences
The system should value direct feedback from children and families about their experience as part of judging success, and actively learn through reflection about what is working well.

Developing an evidence base for transformative change

The opportunities identified in the report draw on a large number of case studies and examples of relational approaches in Australia and beyond. These provide a basis for better understanding what a relational approach could look like in practice, and what practical opportunities could be explored further in NSW.
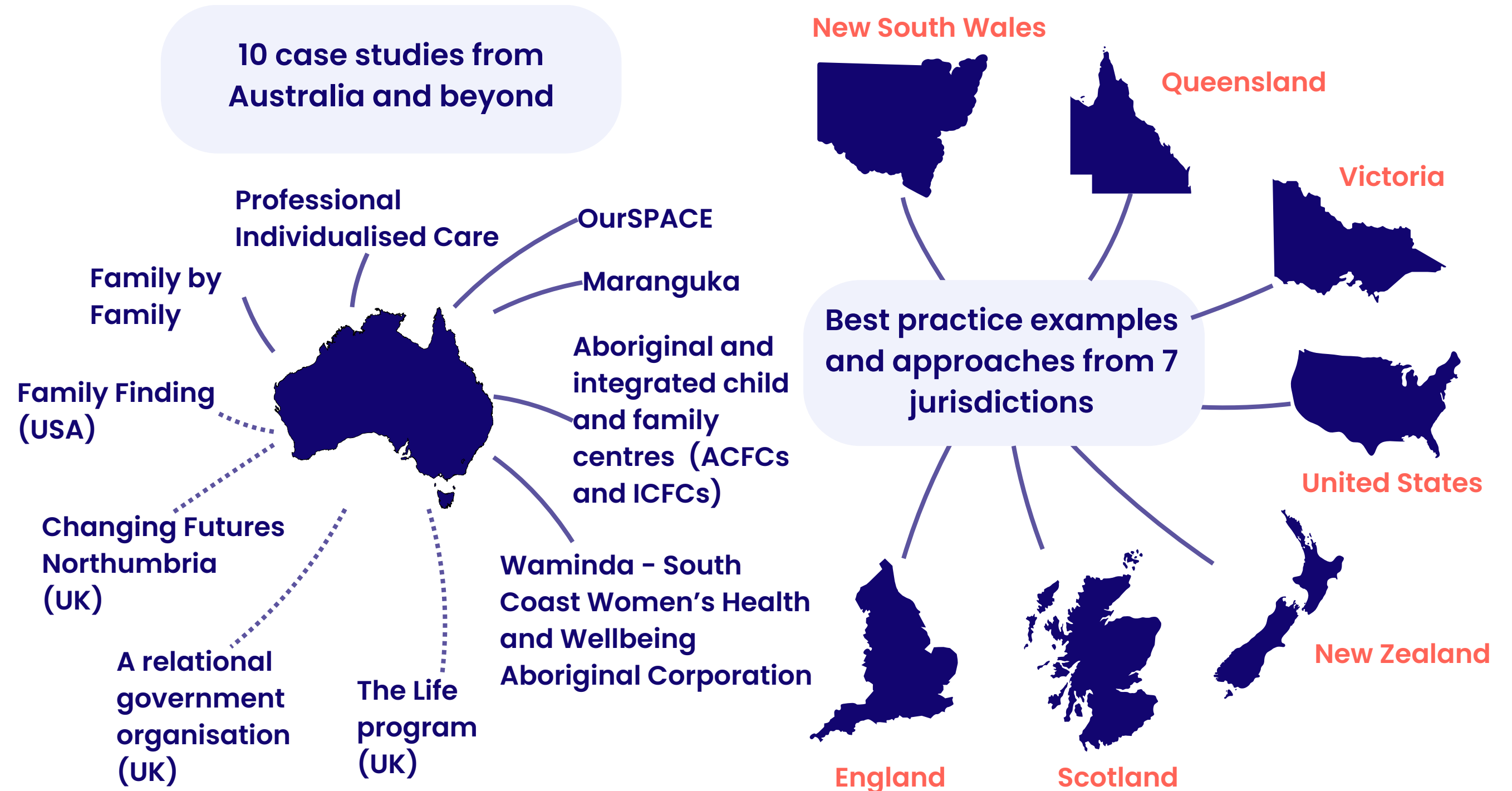

100+
research papers and studies reviewed

Evidence library

Practitioner experience

Academic literature

Case studies

10 case studies from Australia and beyond

Professional Individualised Care

Family by Family

OurSPACE

Maranguka

Aboriginal and integrated child and family centres (ACFCs and ICFCs)

Family Finding (USA)

Changing Futures Northumbria (UK)

A relational government organisation (UK)

The Life program (UK)

Waminda – South Coast Women's Health and Wellbeing Aboriginal Corporation

Best practice examples and approaches from 7 jurisdictions

New South Wales

Queensland

Victoria

United States

New Zealand

England

Scotland

A highly collaborative process

50+
deep-dive interviews conducted between February and April 2024

96+ hrs
of in-depth collaboration with experts

Leveraging expertise across 10+ areas:
1. First Nations wellbeing and self-determination
2. Social work
3. Child Protection
4. Regulation
5. Law
6. Design thinking
7. Human geography
8. Evidence-based policymaking
9. Social innovation
10. Public Health

A diverse range of policy and practice experts consulted, including from:

- Adopt Change
- Better Government Lab, Georgetown University
- Independent review of children's social care (UK)
- Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU
- Maranguka
- The Children's Court of NSW
- The NSW Association of Children's Welfare Agencies
- The Office of the Children's Guardian
- UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose

Interviews included **international experts** on relational models and institutional reform in the child welfare sector

Expert Advisory Group

Professor Valerie Braithwaite (Emeritus Professor, School of Regulation and Global Governance, Australian National University)

Professor Judy Cashmore AO (Professorial Research Fellow, School of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney)

Professor Amy Conley Wright (Professor and Director, Research Centre for Children and Families, University of Sydney)

Professor Ilan Katz (Professor, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales)

Professor Lynne McPherson (Chair, Out of Home Care Research and Deputy Director, Centre for Children and Young People, Faculty of Health, Southern Cross University)

A/Professor Tim Moore (Deputy Director, Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University)
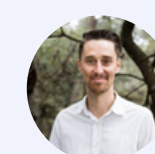
Dr BJ Newton (Scientia Senior Research Fellow, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales)
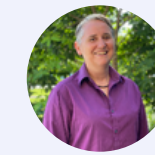
Dr Elizabeth Reimer (Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Health, Southern Cross University)

Bernie Shakeshaft (Founder and Director, Backtrack)

Jarrod Wheatley OAM (Chairperson, Centre for Relational Care)

Mandy Young (Board Member, Professional Individualised Care)

Executives from across the NSW Department of Communities and Justice and the Premier's Department (Aboriginal Affairs)

JMI Collaborative Projects

The JMI model brings together government, researchers, and other experts and stakeholders to work cooperatively on challenging policy issues. For this project, the JMI project team worked in close collaboration with the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) and the Centre for Relational Care (CRC).

Explanatory statement of authorship
JMI does not adopt an institutional view on specific policy issues. This report reflects the calibrated view of the project team, which operated under a highly collaborative model. Its view was formed on the basis of an assessment of relevant academic research, stakeholder consultations, and engagement with relevant experts, including an expert advisory group (EAG). The findings and options of any JMI publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute, its Board, funders, advisers, or other partners.

About JMI

A formal partner of the NSW Government, JMI is a unique joint venture between government and leading Australian universities. We work closely with government ministers, departments, and other decision-makers to help address their most pressing policy priorities, enabling them to harness a wide range of expert advice.

Established in 2021 as an independent, non-partisan institute with charitable status, JMI has already had a substantial impact, promoting evidence-based policymaking and strategy for the public good across a wide range of issues.

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