



A Child Connection System: transforming child protection and OOHC

We founded the Centre for Relational Care last year with a clear purpose: to drive transformative change within the child protection and out-of-home (OOHC) care system.

Despite decades of inquiries, reports, and governmental reforms, for too many children, the experience of care remains unacceptably poor. It's time for widespread cultural change.

We asked ourselves, "What if we could build a system, not just around providing shelter and education, but equally around ensuring that every child has at least one person, and ideally a network, who knows and genuinely cares for them? What if our system prioritised relationships?"

Our approach is two-fold. It involves transforming the 'big system', by prioritising relationships in policies and regulations, and alleviating bureaucratic burdens on caregivers and service providers so they can spend more time with people, instead of paperwork.

At the same time, we're seeking to support the relational strength of local community-based services, such as NGOs, caregivers, and grassroots initiatives, learning from communities and finding ways to scale and replicate successful local programs.

This is our first quarterly newsletter, to provide a regular update on our progress. We've included the highlights of our work so far, with plenty more to come.

Thank you for taking the time to find out more about us.



Sophi Bruce

Sophi Bruce
Startup CEO

About the Centre for Relational Care

We are an independent, not-for-profit advocacy body seeking to transform Australia's care systems to a relational model.

As a first step, we will set out a pathway to reform the child protection and out-of-home care system, starting with NSW.

We want real relationships to form the heart of a new "Child Connection System". We want to remove the barriers that make it hard for children to experience safe and secure relationships.

Guided by people with lived experience, we partner with leaders and practitioners across the country to create and implement disruptive, scalable solutions and policy reforms.

Design dialogue workshops



Through our recent Design Dialogue workshops we brought together experts from across the care sector to begin the process of co-designing a relationship-based model of care. We started to generate practical solutions to three key areas of change:

- 💡 A new “full service” government interface to support families, focused on early support so that fewer children go into OOHC.
- 💡 A more relational way of evaluating out-of-home care services, using deliberative discussions and ‘quality of relationships’ metrics.
- 💡 Scaling and replicating effective local programs that support children and families with relational care and strong community networks.

At this stage, they are high level concepts to be explored and refined further, with consultation and support from partners and engagement from the broader care sector. Ideally, we will adapt and progress these to proof-of-concept projects.



Collaborative project with James Martin Institute

Another important step towards achieving the vision for a Child Connection System is our collaborative project with the James Martin Institute for Public Policy, supported the NSW Department of Communities and Justice.

The project, initiated in January 2024, is developing pathways for embedding a new relationship-based approach across the NSW child protection and OOHC system. The report is due for completion in mid 2024.

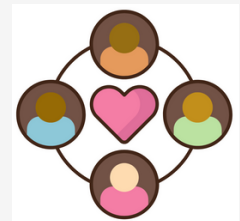
Stakeholder perspectives on the care system

We have completed our first wave of engagement with stakeholders across the care sector on the barriers and opportunities to developing a Child Connection System. A summary of the feedback is available on the Resources section of our website at centreforrelationalcare.org.au

This is just the beginning. We’re continuing to engage with stakeholders through meetings, surveys and workshops. This feedback, along with the voices of children and young people, is helping to guide our policy recommendations on how to transform child protection and OOHC to a relational system.

Understanding relationship-based practice

We are working to develop a shared understanding of what makes an out-of-home care system truly relational.



There are many definitions, and in our opinion, no one group has a monopoly on what is, or isn’t, ‘relationship-based practice’.

However, drawing on our conversations with stakeholders, we compiled an initial list of questions which service providers can ask themselves to help determine if their approach puts the child’s relationships at the centre. These questions include:

- Do the people accessing my care service express a strong connection to at least one person in the organisation?
- How do people in my organisation spend most of their time? Is it on paperwork, or with people to have conversations with them and support them to build their capabilities and pursue their goals?
- Is there a predetermined end date or time frame when starting the engagement with the person needing help?
- If the funding stops, does my engagement have to stop?
- Has there been sufficient reflection on what sort of relationship boundaries make most sense in context, or are these arbitrary and fixed?
- Does my practice, operating environment and culture create the opportunity for people to offer the potential of a lifelong connection?
- Does my practice, operating environment and culture provide the space and flexibility for good matches in terms of personality, identities and backgrounds?

For more information about relationship-based practice visit centreforrelationalcare.org.au

Launch of the Centre for Relational Care



We launched the Centre for Relational Care at a gathering in Sydney in December. It was lovely to share ideas across a community of people with lived experience of child protection and OOHC – and with the commitment and energy to drive change.

Aunty Rhonda Grovenor-Dixon delivered a Welcome to Country and spoke about issues with the care system, particularly for First Nations children and young people. The Hon Kate Washington MP, NSW Minister for Families and Communities, reiterated her commitment to change, noting that maintaining the status quo is not an option. Our founding supporters, Jarrod Wheatley, CEO of Professional Individualised Care, and Bernie Shakeshaft, Founder Director of BackTrack, spoke about why we need to put relationships at the centre of the care system.

Most importantly, we were privileged to hear from young people, their families and carers as they shared their personal accounts of out-of-home care experiences.



Building momentum for change at Admiralty House

We were honoured to be hosted by Their Excellencies the Governor-General and Mrs Linda Hurley at Admiralty House in March. The event brought together CEOs, senior executives, policymakers and advocates dedicated to the welfare of children and young people.

It was an opportunity to discuss the Centre for Relational Care's vision and approach to building a relationship-based care system, and the importance of collaboration across the care sector to remove barriers to positive change.



What's next?

Here are some of the activities we'll be working on over the coming months:

- Completion of a report by our research partner, the James Martin Institute for Public Policy, on *Putting human relationships at the centre of transformational change of the child protection and OOHC system*.
- Continue to collect lived experience stories through interviews and anonymous feedback sharing, to publish on the Your Stories page of our website.
- Exploration of collaborative opportunities and partnerships with research bodies and peak groups.
- Participation in panel discussions and roundtables.
- Ongoing meetings and engagement with stakeholders for collective sharing on relational models and initiatives, and to further develop a shared understanding of relationship-based practice.



I was always made to feel like the ‘foster kid’

My name is M and I entered into foster care when I was in primary school. Some parts of that day I remember vividly, other parts are a big blur.

Mum called someone at DOCS to ask for a food voucher because we didn't have any food and she was trying to feed us. They told mum she had to come in to the office to get it. They made me go into a little play room. Next thing I hear is my mum screaming ‘No! M come out now’ and banging on the door. I tried to get out, no one was in there with me. I was so scared and wanted more than anything to go to my mum. That night I went to a foster carer with my brother and sisters.

That was the last night I ever spent with my younger siblings. The next day they separated us. My brother and I stayed together for the next few years only ever seeing my little siblings at family events. I didn't see my mum for another month or two. We went into a few foster care homes, there was a nice family. We stole lip balm from her. Then there was another, that wasn't good, we were locked outside if we made noises, shower with the door open, sleep with light on, ask for permission to use the toilet. We were treated like feral animals by her. Her husband was kind.

After more short placements, we were sent to live with our family in another part of Australia. We stayed there for a year but when my uncle asked DOCS for some help with our trauma they (DOCS) came over and took us from that home too.

They told us we would only be in Sydney for a few weeks and then put us into a hotel where there were lots of other foster kids.

We stayed in a lot of hotels over the next years. Then we were told we would get a chance to go home to live with our mum but...they had to split me and my sibling up. We were put on stupid charts in our new placement. I stayed there with my new carers and their kids for about 3 years. I chose to leave there because there were always arguments, mostly because I was treated very differently by them and was always made to feel like ‘the foster kid’, mostly at the end. I remember feeling hurt whenever they would say ‘you can't come, it's just family this time’.

Now I live on my own but I have a carer that visits me every day, takes me places and helps me learn how to live on my own. I like it a lot. My rules are easier to understand than all the other places I've lived.

My life would've been so different now if my mum was allowed to stay with us while she got help. If I had to be in a hotel for years with workers all the time, why couldn't my mum be there with us? We would still be safe and supported by our family.

Our work is guided by lived experiences.

Please help us share Your Story:



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