

## Participation of children and young people in care in decisions affecting their lives

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A key tenet of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is that children and young people's views should be taken into account in any decision that is likely to affect their wellbeing or position in life (Delfabbro, Barber, & Bentham, 2002). In recognition of this, there has been a shift in the focus of research projects to include the views, opinions and experiences of children and young people in care—in particular to inform practice and service delivery. Participation in research can also empower children and young people and can give researchers better knowledge, information and understanding of issues directly relating to them (New South Wales Office of the Children's Guardian, 2004).

### Aim

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In this paper, we aim to:

- summarise what we know from Australian research about the participation of children and young people in care in research and in matters that affect their time in care;
- assess the quality of the evidence base; and
- identify future research needs.

For each of the studies identified, a review was conducted describing the study's aim, methodology and key findings, and identifying any particular strengths or limitations that would affect whether the study findings could be generalised to a wider context. In this paper, the findings from this review are summarised to provide an overall picture of the Australian evidence base on the outcomes for children and young people in care. For a detailed description of each individual study review, see the tables in the Appendix.

### What research was reviewed?

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Eleven Australian research studies examining the participation of children and young people in care that were completed between 2000 and 2006, and were publicly available, were reviewed. (For more information on how Australian research was identified, see Bromfield & Osborn, 2007. For papers on other topic areas, go to [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/brief/menu.html#research](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/brief/menu.html#research).)

These studies have been grouped into three sub-themes:

- including the views of children and young people in care;
- family and identity from the viewpoint of children and young people in care; and
- the involvement of children and young people in research.

## Including the views of children and young people in care

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It is crucial that children and young people, as the primary clients of out-of-home care services, are given opportunities to voice their views and opinions on their experiences in foster care and how their needs could be better met.

### The studies

Seven of the studies identified had findings that contributed to the Australian evidence base on including the views of children and young people in care. They were:

1. CREATE Foundation (2004), *In Their Own Words: Experience of ACT Children and Young People in Care* (see Appendix, page 1).
2. CREATE Foundation (2005), *Indigenous Children and Young People in Care: Experiences of Care and Connections With Culture* (see Appendix, page 2).
3. Delfabbro, Barber, and Bentham (2002), "Children's Satisfaction With Out-of-Home Care in South Australia" (see Appendix, page 3).
4. Gilbertson and Barber (2003), "Breakdown of Foster Care Placement: Carer Perspectives and System Factors" (see Appendix, page 7).
5. Mason and Gibson (2004), *The Needs of Children in Care: A Report on a Research Project. Developing a Model of Out-of-Home Care to Meet the Needs of Individual Children, Through Participatory Research* (see Appendix, page 8).
6. New South Wales Community Services Commission (2000), *Voices of Children and Young People in Foster Care* (see Appendix, page 9).
7. O'Neill (2004), "'I Remember the First Time I Went Into Foster Care—It's a Long Story...': Children, Permanent Parents, and Other Supportive Adults Talk About the Experience of Moving From One Family to Another" (see Appendix, page 10).

### How reliable is the evidence base regarding including the views of children and young people in care?

A strength of the study by Delfabbro, Barber, and Bentham (2002) was that the authors checked the representativeness of the sample and found that the children in the study were highly representative of the population of children referred for placements during the study period. However, a limitation of the study that the authors acknowledged was not able to be controlled for, was that it is possible that only the more successful and satisfied carers agreed to have the children placed with them participate in the study. The study by the NSW Community Services Commission (2000) study also noted that district officers' ability to veto the involvement of a particular child from participating in the study may have impacted on the representativeness of the sample. However, a strength of the report was that they utilised an independent consultative group, which provided an objective viewpoint for the findings. The report by the CREATE Foundation (2005) extensively documented participants' responses, but did not provide the reader with general themes and, as such, it is unclear how the research findings informed the recommendations. Assessing the degree to which children's and young people's views about care are heard was hampered by the problems encountered in enabling children and young people to participate in research, which we discuss later.

# What do we know about including the views of children and young people in care?

## Children's and young people's views on care

The New South Wales Community Services Commission (2000) conducted a study that aimed to identify children's and young people's ( $n = 66$ ) perspectives on their needs in out-of-home care. Findings on the whole demonstrated that most children and young people in care (aged 8 to 18 years) reported that they were relatively happy and thought they were better off as a result of being in foster care (Delfabbro, Barber, & Bentham, 2002; New South Wales [NSW] Community Services Commission, 2000). Children also considered foster homes to be secure, happy and supportive and felt that their caseworkers were helpful, caring and willing to listen for the most part. However, the majority of participants (47 of the 66 participants) involved in the Community Services Commission report stated that they wanted much more contact and connection with their family members.

**The majority of children in care report that they are fairly happy and think they are better off as a result of being in foster care.**

Children and young people in care in the ACT did reveal instances of poor, even unacceptable, practice and casework (CREATE Foundation, 2004). The NSW Community Services Commission (2000) report noted that even small oversights can have a lasting and negative impact on the child or young person; for example, not being told why workers had moved on, or not being able to bring a pet to a new placement. Such occurrences can compound feelings of loss, grief, sadness and the feeling of being "different" from other children and young people.

**Even small oversights can have a lasting and negative impact on the child or young person.**

The CREATE Foundation (2004) report also noted systemic factors that appeared to have contributed to a negative care experience for a group of children and young people in the study; for example, slow systemic procedures that prevented timely and adequate response; court processes that did not adequately consult with children and young people; lack of resources, support and training for carers and caseworkers; inadequate early intervention strategies to support families to stay together and prevent entry into care; inadequate entry into care support; inadequate support and preparation for young people preparing to leave care; and inadequate post-care support. On a more positive note, in another study conducted in 2005 by the CREATE Foundation (this time with Aboriginal children in care in Western Australia), it was reported that caseworkers, carers and residential workers received training in engaging Indigenous children and young people in order to better understand and respond to their particular requirements.

**Systemic factors (e.g., slow systemic procedures, failure to consult young people during court processes) contribute to a negative care experience for a group of children and young people.**

## Children's and young people's responses to placement breakdown

Gilbertson and Barber (2003) documented the views of young people in response to their recent placement breakdowns. The aim of the study was to gain insight into the experiences of young people and give them the opportunity to voice their suggestions about what may have made the placement sustainable. The discussions with the young people revealed several instances where poor social work practice impacted on the placement, including: inadequate preparation of carers, poor communication with children and carers, and inadequate consultation. A prevailing theme noted throughout all of the interviews "was the depth of unhappiness felt by most children and their foster carers when placements break down" (p. 194).

**A prevailing theme is the depth of unhappiness felt by most children and their foster carers when placements break down.**

Interestingly, the young people in Gilbertson & Barber's study (2003) commented that those who experienced a move from a placement they liked fared considerably worse than those young people who were moved from a placement they disliked. "These contrasting outcomes suggest that expeditious termination of a placement which is not going well may be the most sound intervention, and, conversely, that early intervention to address problems developing in an otherwise promising placement should be a priority" (p. 30). The authors concluded that, in view of the distress caused by placement disruption, everything needs to be done to reduce or avoid placement disruption occurring in the lives of foster children.

**Those who experience a move from a placement they like fare considerably worse than those young people who are moved from a placement they dislike.**

## **The value to children and young people in care of positive relationships**

Many children commented on the importance of having a stable, trusting relationship with one person. This relationship did not necessarily have to be with their carers; it could also be with a caseworker or another adult. In the study by O'Neill (2004), children reported that adults (e.g., teachers) who listened to and supported them in the long-term were a highly valued resource. It was noted that when a positive relationship existed, it often had a marked positive impact on the young person's time in care (NSW Community Services Commission, 2000). Research by the CREATE Foundation (2004) also highlighted the importance of carers (foster, kinship or residential home) and caseworkers in the lives of children in care. Ten of the 18 children and young people studied indicated their carer was the most important person in influencing whether things went well for them or not. The CREATE Foundation report provided both carers and caseworkers with documented recognition of the positive impact they had in the lives of the children and young people in their care and also provided recommendations of what they might continue doing to improve the children's and young people's time in care.

**A stable, trusting relationship with at least one person (whether their carer or even their caseworker) is important for children and young people in care.**

## **The impact of being heard on children and young people**

Recent research has highlighted the importance and value of including the views of children and young people in care. According to Delfabbro, Barber, and Bentham (2002), ensuring that decisions are made in line with children's wishes results in children being more cooperative in placement and obtaining more preferable placement options. More importantly, children are likely to benefit psychologically if their views are taken into account. For example, their self-esteem is likely to be enhanced as they are given more control over their own lives. The children and young people in the study by Mason and Gibson (2004) also reported that having some power to be heard in their interactions with others is imperative to getting their needs met.

**It is important to include the views of children and young people in care. Being heard can enhance children's and young people's self-esteem and feeling of empowerment, benefit them psychologically and better ensure that their needs are met.**

## **What future research is needed regarding including the views of children and young people in care?**

Further research is needed so that a larger number of the voices of children and young people in care are heard. Gilbertson and Barber (2002) suggested research be undertaken with a larger sample of children and young people from all forms of Australian out-of-home care, including

foster care, residential care, group care and relative/kinship care. It was also highlighted that governments need to improve access to children and young people in care so that research can be conducted more easily, and social workers need to recognise the importance of research and encourage their clients to be more amenable to the process. To the extent possible without compromising children's safety, children and young people in care need to be guaranteed that their views will remain anonymous so that researchers are able to get a true indication of their experience in the care system.

## Family and identity from the viewpoint of children and young people in care

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The issues of family and identity have been often discussed by researchers, practitioners and policy-makers in terms of theory and what is considered to be in the best interests of the child and/or young person. Unfortunately, these issues rarely include or are informed by the viewpoints, opinions or experiences of children and young people themselves.

### The studies

Four studies identified some interesting findings that contribute to the Australian evidence base on the issues of family and identity for children and young people in care. They were:

1. Gardner (2004a), "Perceptions of Family: Complexities Introduced by Foster Care. Part 1: Childhood Perspectives" (see Appendix, page 4).
2. Gardner (2004b), "Perceptions of Family: Complexities Introduced by Foster Care. Part 2: Adulthood Perspectives" (see Appendix, page 5).
3. Mason and Gibson (2004), *The Needs of Children in Care: A Report on a Research Project. Developing a Model of Out-of-Home Care to Meet the Needs of Individual Children, Through Participatory Research* (see Appendix, page 8).
4. O'Neill (2004), "I Remember the First Time I Went Into Foster Care—It's a Long Story...! Children, Permanent Parents, and Other Supportive Adults Talk About the Experience of Moving From One Family to Another" (see Appendix, page 10).

## How reliable is the evidence base regarding family and identity from the viewpoint of children and young people in care?

All of the Australian research into the issue of family and identity from the viewpoint of children and young people in care that was identified employed qualitative research methods and had adequate sample sizes. However, the small number of studies coupled with the reliance on qualitative designs, mean that the results can not be generalised to other children and young people in care.

## What do we know about family and identity from the viewpoint of children and young people in care?

O'Neill (2004) conducted a longitudinal study that explored how children and young people experience alternative family care. The participants of the study included eight young people aged from 18 months to 13 years at time of placement with their permanent families, all of whom, over a period of three years, had experienced multiple previous placements, and had interviews with their permanent carers (birth and/or foster families,  $n = 51$  interviews), their teachers ( $n = 26$  interviews) and caseworkers ( $n = 34$  interviews). The six key themes evident in the findings included the children noting a strong need to feel that they belonged in their new families. Structure and rules were found to help young people to gain a sense of confidence in their future ability to make their way in the world. Another theme from the interviews included the importance of maintaining relationships with birth family members. Young people also highlighted the need for practical help with strategies to explain their family situation or to

counteract bullying. Finally, “the ability for children and young people to make choices such as who to call ‘Mum’ or ‘Dad’ and how to explain their background is significant in the building of identity” (p. 216).

**The ability to make choices, such as who to call “Mum” or “Dad” and how to explain their background, is significant in the building of identity.**

The main findings that emerged from O’Neill’s (2004) interviews included themes of roles, boundaries, support and the effects of the past. The author noted that “the children struggled with the emotional effects of past abuse and neglect, as well as learning how to be part of a new family, while maintaining a relationship with their birth family” (p. 216). O’Neill’s findings provide important information on how children experience alternative care and have implications for the children, permanent families and professionals, especially in relation to the issue of family contact.

**Children and young people struggle with how to be part of a new family while maintaining a relationship with their birth family.**

Gardner (2004a) conducted a study on the perceptions of family and described two sets of data. The first set of data described perceptions of family held by 43 children who were in long-term foster care at the time of the study, and the second set of data described the childhood recollections of family of 39 adults who had been in foster care as children. Gardner noted that little research has been done on the topic of whom children in foster care think comprise members of their family, both during childhood and as adults after leaving care. Gardner discussed how complex the relationships were for children and that there is a need for options to be kept open to enable foster children to maximise their opportunities for connection with both foster and natural families.

**Relationships for children and young people in care are complex and there is a need for options to be kept open to enable foster children to maximise their opportunities for connection with both foster and biological families.**

The analyses by Gardner (2004a) showed that both children and adults referred to their foster family as “family”, while also maintaining some links with their natural family. These relationships were found to be independent of variables such as age at first placement or length of time in care. Gardner noted that an interesting finding was the children’s capacity to form relationships whenever suitable opportunities were available.

**Children have a capacity to form relationships whenever suitable opportunities are available.**

A second article by Gardner (2004b) builds on research into child-related perceptions of family when adults spent time in care as children. The second study was a quasi-longitudinal study that compared 39 adults’ retrospective childhood representations of family (from the previous study) with representations they had constructed in their adult family. Gardner noted many similarities between childhood and adult representations of family and showed that some participants established and re-established relationships (with natural parents, siblings and selected foster parents) later in life. Again, Gardner reasserted that it is important that options remain open for foster children to provide opportunities for relationships to develop with both biological and foster families and that policies that keep these options open for children be supported. Gardner argued that even though relationships with natural parents should be nurtured, this should not be done at the expense of nurturing relationships with foster families, who, she argued, can be a major source of support for foster children in adulthood.

**Relationships with natural parents should be nurtured (taking into account children’s wishes and their need to be kept safe), but not at the expense of nurturing relationships with foster families.**

A collaborative action research project was undertaken to contribute knowledge to improving the ways in which out-of-home care services could meet the needs of children and young people through a participatory research process (Mason & Gibson, 2004). The aims of the research project were to develop a holistic model of out-of-home care to meet the needs of individual children and young people through the participation of children and young people and other adult groups in the research. One of the main findings of the research project was the importance of maintaining connections based on familiarity/known and/or having something in common for children and young people in care. The main emotional need for children and young people identified in the interviews was to the need to be loved and to have someone there for them. Furthermore, there is a need for children to not only be “cared about” but “cared for”. Based on the research findings, Mason and Gibson provided a number of suggested principles of practice and policy for children and young in out-of-home care.

**There is a strong need for children to feel that they are loved, cared about and also cared for.**

## What future research is needed regarding family and identity from the viewpoint of children and young people in care?

It is important for researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to understand the fundamental issues of family and identity from the viewpoints of the consumers of the foster care service. Future research is needed with a range of children and young people residing in all types of care (i.e., foster, relative and residential) to identify the different experiences and viewpoints involved. It is also important to research different age and cultural groups for the same reasons.

## The involvement of children and young people in research

The role of an independent representative for children and young people in care is an area that has gained more attention in recent years. Several states and territories in Australia have appointed guardians/commissioners and independent representatives to improve services for children and young people in care and to ensure their safety.

### The studies

Four studies identified findings that contributed to the Australian evidence on the involvement of children and young people in research. They were:

1. CREATE Foundation (2005), *Indigenous Children and Young People in Care: Experiences of Care and Connections With Culture* (see Appendix, page 2).
2. Gilbertson and Barber (2002), “Obstacles to Involving Children and Young People in Foster Care Research” (see Appendix, page 6).
3. New South Wales Community Services Commission (2000), *Voices of Children and Young People in Foster Care* (see Appendix, page 9).
4. Western Australian Department of Community Development (2004), *Indigenous Wards in Care Project* (see Appendix, page 11).

## How reliable is the evidence base regarding the involvement of children and young people in research?

There was no direct Australian research on the involvement of children and young people in research. Rather, access to children and young people for the purpose of research was a limitation noted by several authors who had conducted studies that included children and young people. These studies clearly highlight the need for these problems to be addressed. In some cases, findings may have been affected by selection bias and it is possible that individuals

who were not happy with the system were excluded. This limits the generalisations that can be made from research findings in which children and young people in care have been consulted.

## What do we know about the involvement of children and young people in research?

Gilbertson and Barber (2002) revealed that there were very low response rates (between 18% and 27.5%) in four studies on children in care previously undertaken in South Australia—a limitation acknowledged by the authors of these four studies (see Barber, Delfabbro, & Cooper, 2000, 2001; Delfabbro, Barber, & Cooper, 2000, 2002). Gilbertson and Barber's analysis of low response rates in out-of-home care research revealed that many children and young people were excluded from studies due to agency social workers not cooperating with the research project, or social workers vetoing their participation. Similarly, a limitation of the New South Wales Community Services Commission (2000) study was that caseworkers or district officers were able to veto involvement of a particular child from participating in their study. A further example is the study by the CREATE Foundation (2005), commissioned by the Western Australian Department for Community Development, which comprised qualitative interviews with a random selection of 13 of the 50 Indigenous children and young people in care identified in an audit of case files of Indigenous children in the care of the Department (see Western Australian Department for Community Development, 2004). The aim of the report was to provide a forum for Indigenous children and young people to comment on their understanding of the care process, their care experiences and their connections to their families and culture. Echoing the problems encountered by researchers in South Australia and New South Wales, it was reported that the project was negatively affected by some caseworkers' resistance to allowing the project group to speak with the children and young people.

**Many children and young people are excluded from studies due to agency social workers not cooperating with the research project, or social workers and/or carers vetoing their participation.**

The problems encountered by the researchers are concerning, as it goes against a key tenet of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children's views should be taken into account in any decision that is likely to affect their wellbeing or position in life. Gilbertson and Barber (2002) argued that the very low response rates were a major concern and advocated for the appointment of an independent representative for children in care to review research proposals and to negotiate research access to children. Under this proposal, the role of the independent representative would include ensuring the research proposal is appropriate and that procedures are in place to ensure that children would not be further harmed through their participation. Furthermore, they stated that until the problems of obtaining access to larger samples that are representative of children and young people in care are minimised, "alternative care practice will suffer an over-reliance on untested principles and the perspectives of children and young people in out-of-home care will remain excluded" (p. 257).

**An independent representative for children and young people can play an important role in improving access to children and young people in care for the purposes of research.**

## What future research is needed regarding the involvement of children and young people in research?

Gilbertson and Barber (2002) suggested that an independent body be employed to represent the views of children and young people, as had been established at that time in New South Wales and Queensland. The authors stated that such agencies are better able to promote the best interests of the child, and are best positioned to review research proposals and make decisions about access to children in care. Children's guardians/commissioners have since been appointed in South Australia and Victoria, and most other states and territories have proposals in place to



establish an advocate for children in care (go to [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/resources/commissioners/commissioners.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/resources/commissioners/commissioners.html) for details). These advocates have varying levels of independence from state and territory governments and it is not clear what role they will play in relation to external research. Research is needed to directly investigate those factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of children and young people being involved in research. Further, the reasons why some carers and caseworkers veto children's and young people's involvement in research need to be identified. Methods to enhance involvement while retaining the child's best interests as the first priority need to be evaluated.

## What do we know from Australian research about the participation of children and young people in care?

### A summary

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Australian research on the participation of the children and young people in care comprised 11 studies in three areas: including the views of children and young people in care, family and identity, and the involvement of children and young people in research.

In summary, the findings related to the participation of children and young people in care demonstrated that the process creates for the children and young people a sense of power and control, and provides them with "a voice" with which to describe their experiences and their perspectives on what is important for them. Together, the studies demonstrated how important it is to provide opportunities for children and young people in care to be heard (i.e., through participatory research) and that this process is crucial to ensure that their needs are met.

Overall, the research demonstrated that:

- The majority of children in care report that they are fairly happy and think they are better off as a result of being in foster care.
- Even small oversights can have a lasting and negative impact on the child or young person.
- Systemic factors (e.g., slow systemic procedures, failure to consult young people during court processes) contribute to a negative care experience for a group of children and young people.
- A prevailing theme is the depth of unhappiness felt by most children and their foster carers when placements break down.
- Those who experience a move from a placement they like fare considerably worse than those young people who are moved from a placement they dislike.
- A stable, trusting relationship with at least one person (whether their carer or even their caseworker) is important for children and young people in care.
- It is important to include the views of children and young people in care. Being heard can enhance children's and young people's self-esteem and feeling of empowerment, benefit them psychologically and better ensure that their needs are met.
- The ability to make choices, such as who to call "Mum" or "Dad" and how to explain their background, is significant in the building of identity.
- Children and young people struggle with how to be part of a new family while maintaining a relationship with their birth family.
- Relationships for children and young people in care are complex and there is a need for options to be kept open to enable foster children to maximise their opportunities for connection with both foster and biological families.
- Children have a capacity to form relationships whenever suitable opportunities are available.

- Relationships with natural parents should be nurtured (taking into account children's wishes and their need to be kept safe), but not at the expense of nurturing relationships with foster families.
- There is a strong need for children to feel that they are loved, cared about and also cared for.
- Many children and young people are excluded from studies due to agency social workers not cooperating with the research project, or social workers and/or carers vetoing their participation.
- An independent representative for children and young people can play an important role in improving access to children and young people in care for the purposes of research.

The Australian research in the area of the participation of children and young people in care was limited in its scope and the research findings need to be considered with some caution. All 11 of the Australian studies were qualitative and therefore findings cannot be generalised to all children in care. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, in some cases findings may have been affected by selection bias and this further impacts on the ability to generalise from the research findings.

## Conclusion

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The study findings have provided important insights into the consumers of foster care and offer vital suggestions and opinions from those at the forefront of the service. Notably, the findings suggested that children in care were relatively happy, but often expressed negative feelings toward aspects of casework and placement breakdown. Foster children also reported the need to feel loved and the need to be cared about and cared for by their foster parents and biological parents. The maintenance of connections based on familiarity/knowning and/or having something in common in these relationships was seen as very important. It was also noted that children have a strong need to belong to their new family, but the maintenance of relationships with birth family members is still important, even if it may be associated with negative feelings. It was also recommended that options are kept open so that foster children have the opportunity to have relationships with both biological parents and foster parents. It was also noted that children and young people felt power in being heard (i.e., through participatory research) and being part of the decision-making process, and that this is crucial to ensure that their needs are met.

Despite recognition of the importance of including the views of children and young people in care, Delfabbro, Barber, and Bentham (2002) asserted that few systematic attempts have been made to obtain information regarding children's satisfaction with care. The authors claimed that there are several reasons for failing to include children's wishes in placement decisions. These include difficulties in gaining access to children and young people, and the complexities of interviewing children with special needs. It was also highlighted that children may be reluctant to express their true feelings about their foster homes, especially if they feel that it is likely to negatively impact on them or their placement.

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The National Child Protection Clearinghouse has operated from the Australian Institute of Family Studies since 1995. The Clearinghouse is funded by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services as part of its response to child abuse and neglect. The Clearinghouse collects, produces and distributes information and resources, conducts research, and offers specialist advice on the latest developments in child abuse prevention, child protection, out-of-home care and associated family violence.

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