

Changing Families in Changing Times: Rethinking Belonging Beyond Biology

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Acknowledgement of Cultural Responsibilities

Relationships Australia SA (RASA) acknowledges the cultural, spiritual and economic sovereignty of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. We understand that the ongoing violation of this sovereignty continues to harm Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health, wellbeing and aspirations.

RASA is committed to strengthening the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families and communities. We recognise that respecting and nurturing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is a benefit for all Australians.

Recognition of Lived Experience Statement



We recognise the lived experiences of all families. We cannot have conversations about families without recognising the many, diverse and unique experiences.



What is this session about

Today, we invite you to consider family not as a fixed familiar structure, but as a living ecology of care, biology, law, culture, history, choice, places, belonging and safety.

Different Family Structures

- **Biological** – genetics, ancestry.
- **Legal** – parentage, adoption, guardianship, marriage.
- **Chosen** – relationships intentionally created and maintained.
- **Genetic but unknown** – donors, surrogates, donor and surrogacy conceived people, genetic relatives, birth parents.
- **Known but disconnected** – relationships where contact, recognition or belonging may be complicated.



The paradox of belonging

A person can feel like they belong to a family and yet still have questions:

“Where do I come from?”

“Who looks like me?”

“Who knows my story?”

“Who gets to be part of my story?”

“What are my family’s stories?”

“Who are my Ancestors?”



What happens when we prioritise one family narrative?

- We assume biology is always most important.
- Using labels that fit systems rather than clients.
- Assume that either biology or laws establish legitimacy, authenticity and belonging.
- We do not recognise connections that sit outside of the familiar.



Adoption and donor conception

Adoption and donor conception create opportunities for family formation, but families formed this way are also build on loss.

Losses include:

- Genetic connection and biological family
- Ancestry /Kin/Elders
- Cultural connection and knowledge
- Information about origins.

These experiences can co-exist and it's important to lean into both in family practice.



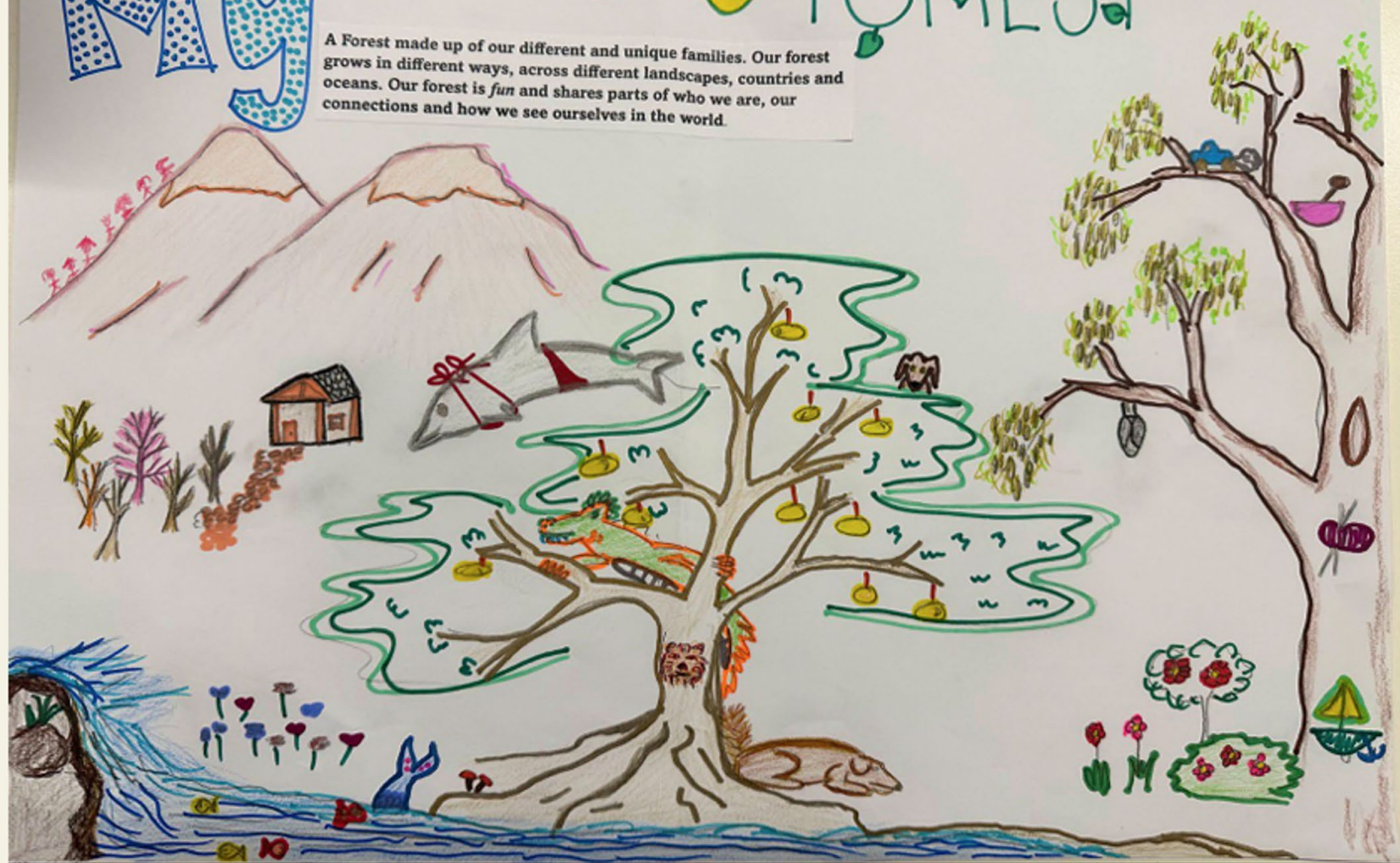
From a family tree to family ecology

A family tree tends to privilege:
lineage → genetics → descent

A family ecology makes room for:
care → connection → history → identity → culture → choice → Country → belonging

MY FAMILY FOREST

A Forest made up of our different and unique families. Our forest grows in different ways, across different landscapes, countries and oceans. Our forest is *fun* and shares parts of who we are, our connections and how we see ourselves in the world.



When systems lag behind families

Families change faster than systems. Many people accessing services encounter assumptions about their families reflected in forms, policies, practices, etc.

The problem is not just exclusion, it is invisibility.

If a person's family is not represented by the system, they often have to educate and advocate.

Instead of “does this family fit our service?”, “does our service fit this family?”. E.g. Who is included in family therapy?

Children at the Centre

- Language is important.
- Children often define family through care and connection.
- Children can belong to more than one family system – not a single-family story.
- Identity stories evolve over time.
- Support should create space for complexity and curiosity.





Shifting Organisations

Ask yourself:

Who do I instinctively picture when I hear “parent”?

Do I assume biological relationships are more significant?

Do I expect a child to feel grateful for their family structure?

Do I interpret searching for biological relatives as a rejection of an adoptive or donor-conceived family?

Does my organisation’s policies leave room for relationships that don’t fit familiar categories?

**What have we
leant from those
we work with?**

