

# Voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in care

Perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People

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- *Enhancing out-of-home care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people* (Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005).

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# Voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in care

**Q: “If there was one thing in your lives that you could change, what would it be?”**

**A: We would really, really want to be with our parents.”**

Considering that out-of-home care is one of the most frequently used care options, it is of concern that little is known about it from the perspective of the children and young people it serves. Research that has been conducted with young people in care reinforces the importance of including young people’s views when policy and practice decisions are made that affect their lives. Although 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, there is limited information available on the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in out-of-home care.

## The study

In a national study, the Australian Institute of Family Studies conducted interviews with *professionals* from government, non-government and Indigenous agencies, as well as *carers* of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and Indigenous *young people* in care (the *participants*). Young people were asked to talk about their experience of out-of-home care, and what they would change about their lives.

In this paper, international and Australian research on children’s wellbeing and the views of young people in care are reviewed, followed by a review of the literature regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in care. We then discuss the findings from children and young people who participated in this study.

## Research from the perspective of children and young people in care

**Why it’s difficult to conduct research with children and young people in care?** Despite recognition of the importance of including the views of children and young people in care, few systematic attempts have been made to obtain information regarding children’s satisfaction with care. There are several reasons for this, which include: difficulties in gaining access to information; and complexities in interviewing

children with special needs. It was also highlighted that children may be less likely 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 (Delfabbro, Barber, & Bentham, 2002a). Researchers have encountered problems in trying to access children and young people in care in order to elicit their views. The difficulties in consulting children in care is concerning as it goes against a key tenet of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that states that children’s views should be taken into account in any decision that is likely to affect their wellbeing or position in life.

**What do children and young people in the international and Australian literature say?** The most frequently enforced message from research with children and young people in care is that they want to be able to participate in decisions about their lives and have their views listened to and acknowledged (CREATE Foundation, 2004; Delfabbro et al., 2002a; Gilbertson & Barber, 2003; Jones & Kruk, 2005; NSW Child Protection Council 1998; Mason, 2004). The literature highlights that adults and young people have different perceptions about a situation and young people may therefore see a solution to a problem differently than adults (NSW Child Protection Council, 1998).

According to Delfabbro et al. (2002a), ensuring that decisions are made in line with children’s wishes results in children being more satisfied in care and obtaining more preferable placement options. However, more importantly, children are more 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. Many young people also want access to information about themselves and also see this as a way of having some agency over their lives (Mason, 2004).

Another theme that emerged from the literature is that young people also said they wanted their needs

<sup>1</sup> In quotations we have replaced the terms “Aboriginal” or “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander” or “Torres Strait Islander” with “Indigenous” to protect the identity of the participants

met as they defined them (Jones & Kruk, 2005). Young people often feel the system (or the child protection service) does not support them enough or meet their needs while in care (CREATE Foundation, 2004; Gardner, 2004; Mathieson, 2001; Jones & Kruk, 2005; NSW Child Protection Council, 1998). Needs that young people wanted met included arranging contact with their birth families, including them in case plan meetings, and providing counselling support during transitions when they are removed from their families or relocated to a new placement.

Ward, Skuse, and Munro (2005) have highlighted the ambivalence that many children and young people in out-of-home care experience. On the one hand, they generally felt positive about their foster families, felt part of their foster family and valued having someone who cared about them. On the other hand, many children and young people in care also wanted a continuing connection with their birth families:

“Although young people often missed their families they were nevertheless frequently relieved to be looked after because it meant they were removed from abusive situations” (Ward, et al., 2005)

Young people also wanted a continuing connection with others who are important in their lives and with whom they share similar experiences and had things in common (Mason, 2004).

Research conducted by Jones and Kruk (2005) with First Nation young people of Canada identified their birth family as their primary object of attachment, even when they did not identify them as those they could turn to in times of difficulty. The study highlighted the importance of maintaining continued contact between young people in care and their birth families. Children who were visited regularly by their birth families had fewer behavioural and mental health problems than those who were not visited regularly. This finding is relevant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in this study who identified maintaining contact with their birth families, and returning home, as their most important concern.

## **The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context**

The South Australian Longitudinal Study analysed detailed information concerning the placement movements and psychosocial outcomes of children in foster care (Barber & Delfabbro, 2004). Researchers found that Indigenous children from metropolitan areas and non-Indigenous children from rural areas had longer histories of being in out-of-home care and were most likely to be under a court order at the time of placement (Barber & Delfabbro, 2004). Indigenous

children in metropolitan areas were least likely to be referred into care for reasons of maltreatment and had poorer physical health. Analyses at later time points indicated that Indigenous children were less likely than non-Indigenous children to have contact with their families, particularly in the first few months after being placed into care (Delfabbro et al., 2002b), and were more/less likely to be reunified with family than non-Indigenous children in care (Delfabbro et al., 2003).

McMahon and Reck (2003) drew attention to the need to develop indicators of wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care. Mainstream wellbeing assessments for children and young people in care focus on indicators of health, educational progress and social development. McMahon and Reck argued that dimensions of wellbeing that prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander commentators contend are important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are ignored. Specifically, the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should include cultural and spiritual dimensions as well as social status, physical and emotional wellbeing. These should be considered in holistic terms in relation to the wellbeing of the child's community.

Furthermore, McMahon and Reck (2003) also noted that it is important to consider housing, employment and other economic indicators of the child's community when assessing children and young people's wellbeing, as many Indigenous commentators believe that the lack of an economic base underlies social disintegration within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

## **Voices of the young people in this study**

***How did we find out what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in care think about 'out-of-home care'?*** In two states (Queensland and Western Australia) the department responsible for child protection and out-of-home care sent a letter of invitation to their guardians. Those young people who wished to participate were asked to have their guardian respond to the department and provide their contact details. Participants were provided with a short description of the project. The focus groups with young people lasted for up to an hour. Young people were advised that their carers would not be informed of their responses.

At the commencement of the discussions, the young people were reminded that their individual responses would be kept confidential (unless they told us about serious criminal behaviour, abuse, or self-harming behaviour). However, all participants who drew a picture or wrote a story about their experiences and their views of out-of-home care explicitly gave

permission to use this information in our report.

**How many young people participated?** A total of 16 Indigenous young people participated. Three focus groups of Indigenous young people currently in care were conducted in Queensland and Western Australia. One group was mixed (n = 6); one was a group of girls (n = 7) and the other a group of boys (n = 3). The short time frame for the project limited the capacity for coordinating a larger number of focus groups and for representing the perspectives of young people from all jurisdictions. The young people who participated in the focus groups were asked to participate because they were children with whom the departments were in regular contact (some had been involved in a research study by CREATE, or in a cultural activities group run by the department). It is not possible to generalise from these data and say that the views expressed here are representative of the views of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in care. However, the young people's responses are an indication of some of the views that young people may have (without excluding the possibility that other young people in care may have different views from those described in this research).

**What did young people say?** The mixture of ages of the children meant that their responses varied in relevance to the issues being discussed. This was evident in some of the younger children's answers to questions about their experience of being in care and what makes a good carer. Furthermore, behavioural issues in one of the groups seriously compromised the researchers' ability to have any focused discussion or exploration of the issues. In some ways, the behavioural problems demonstrated by the children were a relevant response in that many young people in care demonstrate "challenging behaviours", and the skills that are required by carers – as well as other educational, health and welfare professionals involved in these children's lives – are considerable. In contrast, the other two groups showed evidence of the young people appearing shy and reserved, and needing time to get to know and trust the researchers. Eventually, when invited to draw or write down their stories and their views of what it is like to be a young person in care, they slowly immersed themselves in the task. The focus of their pictures and stories by the end of the group session, suggested that they were really engaged in the task, and were keen to provide their views – even though initially they did not appear eager to express them verbally.

#### (a) Cultural activities

Many girls in one of the focus groups had taken part in a culturally-oriented girls' group coordinated by a departmental representative. Activities included swimming, music, craft, Indigenous painting, a rainforest trip, and camping. Some expressed the positive elements of being able to participate in these things:

*"Cultural activities reminds you of back home. It's cool to do those things."*<sup>2</sup>

However, not all of the young people we spoke to had been given the opportunity to get involved in Indigenous cultural events such as 'National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee' (NAIDOC) week or have other opportunities to participate in traditional Indigenous cultural events, crafts, dance, or other practices.

#### (b) Connection to family and community

Consistent themes expressed by the young people were about wanting to be back in their home community, and wanting to be reunited with their parents. In fact when asked about their experience of being in care and what made a good carer, many children's answers focused on their biological families.

We asked them: "If there was one thing in your lives that you could change, what would it be?" Young people expressed views such as:

*"Get out of foster care."*

*"To be with your family."*

*"Go back to my mother."*

*"Would rather be back in..." [she named her local community]*

*"Get my dad back." [Dad had died].*

*"Dad come to my house."*

*"Have family together – Dad and Mum."*

These themes of reconnection to community and family reunification are important messages from young people. They did not spontaneously suggest concepts such as "stop the abuse" or "be safe", but instead re-affirmed the importance of connection to people and place, even if those situations were deemed by authorities to be inadequate or placing the young person at risk. This was despite the child protection system having swung into action to protect

<sup>2</sup> When quoting verbal responses from young people, or reproducing text from stories and drawings produced in the focus groups, the spelling or grammatical structure used by participants has been retained.

these young people from harm and to prevent them from future harm. One girl, aged 10¾ who had been in out-of-home care, but was currently living with her mum – although her two brothers who were also part of the focus group were living with a relative – seemed aware of the reason why she had been removed from the care of her mother. She wrote:

*“Mum Never Hits us and Im not liying I Love My Mum.”*

In contrast, one young girl articulated that being back home was “boring”:

*“There’s nothing to do. You feel bored when no one takes you anywhere. You just walk around. More things to do here.”*

However, she finished by saying:

*“You’re far away from family – you get homesick.”*

As might be expected, some of the young children expressed more immediate concerns, such as wanting no school and no homework.

We asked their views on what makes a good carer. Words they used to describe people who are good at caring for children included:

*“Kind.”*

*“Good with kids.”*

*“Respect kids.”*

We invited them to draw a picture or write a story out what it is like to be in care. One boy wrote a story about his dad taking him, his siblings and his mum out fishing in a boat, illustrating it with an aerial representation of them in the boat, successfully hauling in fish. Using images of African-American rap singers, one boy wrote:

*“I am a 13 year old. I from [geographic region] My name is [his name]. That’s my brother behind me. I love my brother.”*

Another boy wrote:

*“Sometimes I miss my family. I wanna go back to them. Sometimes I don’t like staying with my carers.”*

The girls tended to write longer stories than the boys. Some examples of their stories concerning what it is like to be in care are depicted below:

*Girl, 16: “Living in the boarding house is sometime feels like I’m in a jail. I get homesick and worried about my*

*mum and dad brothers and sisters. I don’t like being under the Child Safety. I don’t like staying at the people that are caring for me now.”*

*Girl, 15: “I hate foster care I don’t want to be in foster care cause it’s too stricted. I mean it can be... But when I’m in school and for example for my weekend and someone willing to take me out for the weekend, it’s not fare cause I really wanted to go with my cousin at the time she was down here... Yeah I want to get out of it as soon as possible. The boarding school what I go to now, it’s best... the school is good. It’s really fun.”*

*Girl, 15: “I’m 15 years old and I have 4 brother’s and they live with some beautiful carers... I sometimes go up there and have weekend’s with them... they also speak to my mother over the phone and they also go home for a short, or long term Holiday... This term they are going home for a long term holiday... I always go home a lot... I’m in a care with my aunty she take good care of me... and she’s my mother smallest sister. My brother’s live with a indigenous lady... she is so nice... and when my brother’s go home we have fun every holiday they come home... Cause I love home.”*

*Girl, 14: “I have 2 brothers and 2 sister and my self so that 5 of ous all to gether and my mum and dad. I go to [boarding school] to do my schooling. I like it there because I have lots of friends there and I really enjoy it I’m 14 years old I like playing vollyball with my friends.”*

*Girl, 13: “I want to go back to [name of township] to mum and dad. Know I miss my little brother and my mum and dad I love them so much. I live with [names of carers] I like it there where Im living, its nice and quiet there, I love it there I want to move but Im to scared to say it in front of [names of carers]. I want to live at [name of township] because they do lots of things my Mum and Dad and my little brother. I want to go back to [name of township] so my little brother can be happy, hes lonly so I want to go back there.”*

In the young people’s stories about being in care, they placed particular emphasis on their relationship with siblings. This was especially so with the girls’ written responses, and some of the boys’ verbal and pictorial responses, which suggested a nurturing relationship with their siblings. It would appear that many young people in care are already experiencing a cultural commitment to community and caring, which is reflected in their sense of responsibility to family.

## Conclusion

The importance of including young people's views in decisions regarding their out-of-home care has implications for the young person's sense of agency, self-esteem and placement satisfaction. The messages from the young people in this study focused almost exclusively on the importance to them of maintaining connections to their family, their community and their culture. The overriding message from young people was that they wanted to go home to their families. This is an important reminder that although the safety of children and young people is of paramount importance, it is not the only issue to be considered in securing the best interests of the child.

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