

# Child protection: repairing a badly broken system

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## FULL TEXT

PROGRESSIVE changes to the child protection system are taking place, driven in the Hunter by parents and leading academics.

In the thick of it is Felicity Kime, president of Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter, better known as FISH. With experience across generations - she was taken away from her mother as a child, and her own children were placed into care - she has seen some of the best and worst that the system has to offer.

FISH was initially funded as a pilot project looking at parent peer support networks through the University of Newcastle Law school in partnership with Life Without Barriers.

The pilot was supported by parents, practitioners and researchers, including Associate Professor Nicola Ross. The program, now independently funded, continues to provide a point of referral in the justice system, helping parents who have had children removed to navigate the child protection system.

FISH is involved with two streams of work, providing individual parents with support, as well as advocacy for broad systemic change.

A key area of focus is on helping kids who need to stay in out-of-home care to have positive relationships with their families.

"They need to know who their families are, and to understand that things might've gone wrong but they're still able to have a relationship," Ms Kime said.

"There's this idea that kids can only have one parent, or one person that cares about them. What we know is kids can love lots of people, and, in fact, the more people in kids' lives the better.

"And we know that some kids in care have actually had a really terrible time. If the extended family was involved, they would know about that and could do something about it.

"We also know that caseworkers are overworked and their caseloads are high ... so why wouldn't you take advantage of having extended family and parents involved?"

"And you don't have to choose between supporting parents versus children. FISH is a children's rights organisation. What we believe is if you support the parents, you're supporting the children."

Ms Kime, and the other parent peer support workers in the group, can help to equalise the power balance in the system, says Dr Ross, whose research focuses on restorative practice and justice. They can provide support by helping parents feel heard, and let them hear from other parents who have been through it, she says.

When parents aren't heard, the systems that are developed often miss the point, Dr Ross said.

NSW has a history of policing families, rather than supporting them, despite the very strong links to poverty, and the associated links with substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health issues. "They're all linked into poverty and disadvantage," Dr Ross said.

While there are programs available, often they don't mesh with the backgrounds of the people involved.

"They're not particularly successful in engaging with those families. And that's seen as the family's problem because they're not engaging," Dr Ross said.

Research on the parents' perspective shows that often parents are ready to engage when their children are removed. But at that point, they are often left alone. If services are offered, they are sometimes services they're not eligible for.

There is comparatively little funding being spent on family support and prevention, she said, about 17 per cent

nationally, with about 24 per cent going into investigation, and about 60 per cent into out of home care.

"So what we really have is a system that's good at removing children," Dr Ross said. "My real concern from the evidence we have is that there is simply not enough work done, or the kind of work that needs to be done, prior to children coming into care, because at that point we start distancing them from their families.

"That time, in my view, is not being used very well. We should be using it to do everything we can to support those parents.

"We need to centralise the family at each point in the process so that their voices are heard, they're listened to, they're considered, and they're included.

The system is still focused on child removal as the primary tool. We need to change that to better include the parents and the family's perspective on what is going wrong and how to improve things.

"We only look at risk of the child remaining with the parents. We don't look at risk of them being in the system. And that's a problem."

CREDIT: Gabriel Fowler

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