

# Reuniting Families: Supporting Parents Experiencing Child Removal



**Parent and family inclusion and participation is crucial in order to achieve better outcomes for children following removal from homes due to protection concerns.**

'Perspectives of Parents, Practitioners and Carers on Family Inclusion' is current research linked to a suite of research exploring family inclusion and initiatives in child protection. It examines how; practitioners, foster/kinship carers and parents with children in out-of-home care (OOHC), experience and understand parent and family inclusion in child protection processes and what changes/resources would improve the protection systems' capacity to include them. Research shows, that trusting relationships between stakeholders, contributes to improved outcomes for children who have been removed. Other factors include parent advocacy and carer and parent relationships. This research is led by Honorary Associate Professor Nicola Ross from Newcastle Law School, together with colleagues Jessica Cocks, Life Without Barriers and Conjoint Social Work Lecturer, Associate Professor Wendy Foote (Social Work) and Dr Kate Davies (Social Sciences).

In 2018, Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter (FISH), Life Without Barriers and Newcastle Law School worked together to apply for funding from the NSW Law and Justice Foundation to develop and run

the Parent Peer Support Project (PPSP). The key selection criteria for Parent Partners (PP) was lived experience of child removal because of child protection concerns. The management/research team consisted of; Honorary Associate Professor Nicola Ross, Jessica Cocks, Lyn Stoker, Social Worker and Lecturer at the Family action Centre, University of Newcastle and Lou Johnston, Social Work Lecturer, University of Newcastle. The final report for this trial research was published in 2021.

Preliminary research conducted by this team, from March 2015-October 2016 was published in 2017. It found that, parents experience court and other child protection processes as traumatic, isolating and unhelpful. Parents indicated difficulties in receiving and understanding information given to them in court during stressful child protection proceedings. PPSP developed a set of eight information resources that broadly covered key issues and processes of interest to parents that were linked to evidence about family engagement and restoration. PPSP provides a direct pathway to peer support, provided by parents, with no referral or mediating services. Parent Peers (PP) provide a safe source of emotional and practical



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support to address barriers to family engagement. Importantly, PP do not write case notes or reports on their interactions with parents. The Project received support from the Children's Court which, promoted the Project, displayed Project materials and allocated space within the waiting area. The Newcastle Law School formally auspiced the PPSP. During Covid, a free call line was set up where parents could speak with a peer support worker. This peer service is now being operated by FISH – with around 35 percent of support given via the phone. See <https://finclsionh.org>

### The problem

Restoration numbers, that is, children returning home to their families, is trending downwards despite policy and practice efforts to the contrary. The Hunter Valley has relatively high numbers of children in care. In June 2019, there were 2,863 children in statutory care in the Hunter New England Region and 14,339 children in statutory care in the state of NSW. In NSW, 40 percent of the total number of children in care are Aboriginal. One of the biggest reasons for promoting parent and family support and advocacy is the profound power imbalances in the child protection system and well documented poor experiences of parents and families. Almost all families who lose children to care are poor, and there is little or no practice response offered by the child protection system that relates to poverty. Preliminary research conducted by Honorary Professor Nicola Ross and colleagues indicates that, during child protection proceedings parents' experience:

- Lack of clarity and consistency in expectations and requirements
- Lack of recognition of grief and loss
- Lack of opportunities to maintain attachments to children while they are in OOHC
- Limited knowledge about laws and policies

### Methodology

In the latest research 'Perspectives of Parents, Practitioners and Carers on Family Inclusion' qualitative data was collected via focus groups, supplemented by interviews. Two expert panels; practitioner and carers' and a parent panel commented on the design of data collection instruments and early analysis of identified data. Data was analysed using qualitative analysis software (Nvivo) and was triangulated to improve validity. Researchers' reflected on data to consider biases and identify information that contradicted initial ideas.

### Milestones

**2013:** Journal article 'Different Views? Children's Lawyers and Children's Participation in Protective Proceedings in New South Wales, Australia' *International Journal of Law, Policy and Family*.

**2014:** Key note speaker at the NSW Child Representation Conference organised by Legal Aid NSW.

**2018:** Journal Article with Dr Michelle Fernando titled 'Children, Autonomy and the Courts: Beyond the Right to be Heard, written by Aoife Daly' *The International Journal of Children's Rights*.

**2017:** Report titled 'No Voice, No Opinion, Nothing: Parent Experiences When Children are Removed and Placed in Care' (with research team).

**2018:** Journal article with Lou Johnstone, titled 'Evidence-based Law and Practice with Disadvantaged Populations: Perspectives of Parents involved in Child Protection Proceedings' *Newcastle Law Review*.

**2021:** Report titled 'Parent Peer Support Project' (with project team).

### Impact of the Parent Peer Support Project and Research

While parent and family peer support and advocacy in child protection is new to Australia, it has a growing evidence base elsewhere, especially in the USA. It is likely, that parent peers and family advocacy initiatives will be found to contribute to restoration and to shorter stays in care. As of October 2020, around 300 people were helped by the PPSP in; court, in group processes, on the phone and through access to information resources developed by parents for parents. Seventy-five percent of interactions were with women and 25 percent with men. Feedback from parents, court users and other stakeholders were positive. This was the first time in Australia that a team of parents with lived experience of child removal were employed to bring their peer knowledge and skills alongside other care and protection professionals such as lawyers and caseworkers.

The 'No Voice, No Opinion, Nothing' report 2017 has been widely cited in Australia and Internationally. The 'Perspectives of Parents, Practitioners and Carers on Family Inclusion' report is due for release in early 2022. This research, and the Parent Peer Support Project are influencing developments in policy, practice and services to meet the needs of parents who have children removed, to have ongoing contact and relationships with their children. This includes improved and increased support and advocacy.

#### To learn more about this research program:

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