



Government of South Australia

Office of the Guardian
for Children and Young People

What children say about child protection and out of home care

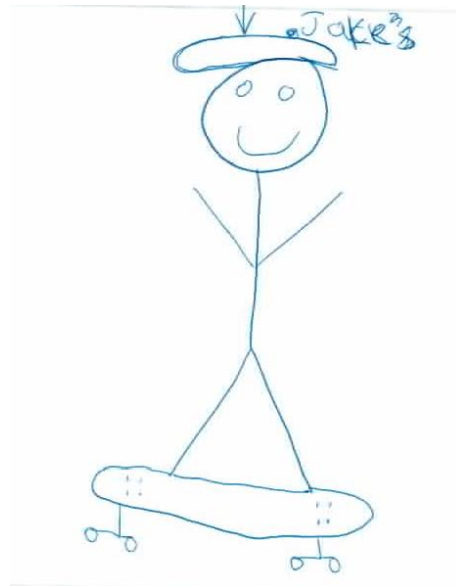
A consultation report for the South Australian
Child Protection Systems Royal Commission

October 2015

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About this report

This report consolidates views from 35 children and young people who participated in a consultation session on 25 March 2015 conducted by the Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People (GCYP) and the CREATE Foundation (SA) on behalf of the SA Child Protection Systems Royal Commission.

All of the participants had personal experience of being in out of home care. They ranged in age from 12 to 25 years, the majority were female and at least five of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background.

The session responded to the spirit expressed by one young person: “the children must be heard – in their own words”.

The Child Protection Systems Royal Commission

The Royal Commission commenced in 2014 to inquire into South Australia’s child protection system in order to ensure the safety of children at risk of harm, including children who have been removed from their families and placed into the custody and/or under the guardianship of the Minister for Education and Child Development.¹

The session

GCYP offered to organise young people’s group contribution to the Royal Commission. The session was run jointly with the SA team at the CREATE Foundation. Royal Commission staff assisted with recording comments.

The views of the young people were sought within four facilitated groups using a hypothetical scenario.

¹ The Terms of Reference are available at -

<http://www.childprotectionroyalcommission.sa.gov.au/aboutus/tor/>

KEY MESSAGES

This report records and synthesises the views of 35 children and young people who have experience of out of home care, so that their perspectives can inform the work of the Child Protection Systems Royal Commission.

Here we presume to adopt their voice to relay a series of messages that emerge from the diverse and often sophisticated views offered.

The essential messages for the Royal Commission from these children and young people

Show us respect by informing us about what is going on and seek our input to decision making that affects our lives

Talk to us in a way we understand

Acknowledge our cultures

Treat us fairly

Don't overburden us, but when we can lead – let us

Don't just look after us, take care of our families (we know our situations are just part of bigger problems)

If adults see that something bad is happening, they should do something!

Provide us with someone we can trust

Make the system work for us ...

RESPECT ME

“we just want to be treated like normal kids”

The **children and young people want to be treated with respect**. Some comments reinforcing this theme were –

- *would want same respect give other people*
- *have children seen as children not a barcode, piece of paper or file [x3]*
- *Families SA need to know we are actual people and that we need to be treated like teenagers*
- *we should have the same rights as a normal kid with their parents. [x2]*
- *“equal” treatment [x8]*
- *“honesty” was sought [x4].*

“don’t treat us like pieces of junk, or like someone they are looking after just for the money”

Respect means that the children and young people should be able to **participate meaningfully in decision making about their lives**. They don’t want to be patronised. They want to deal with an adult who *“doesn’t talk down to them”*.

Essential to this process is that they are spoken with [x4], listened to [x2], feel that they can have a say about what is going on and that their opinions are valued [x2].

“hearing the opinions of young kids is the most important thing”

Access to information and the quality of discussion is valued –

- *“Our views wouldn’t be heard, it would be Families SA or another outsider making a decision for us”*
- *“Would want to know all the good things and not all the bad news”*
- *“nothing hidden from kids / carers”*
- *“no secrets”*
- *“tell the kids how it is”*
- *“don’t tell us you understand when you don’t”*

- *“I want to know for my own wellbeing, but it might worry me and make me stress out. Sometimes more information is better than less, sometimes less is more”*
- *“I want to know before the Court tells me. I didn’t hear until six months after the Court made the Orders”*

“... want workers to keep their promises – ask to do something and they say maybe tomorrow, maybe next week and we never get to do it”

The information sought by the children and young people is reasonable –

- why are they being removed from home? [x8]
- *where am I (or we) going?* [x10]
- *who will they be living with (otherwise expressed as who will look after them)?* [x4]
- *“are we going to be safe”* [x2]
- *“what is going to happen in life now”*
- *“what is happening to us”*
- *“how long will we be back here for?”*

“telling someone you are being removed is like telling someone you have cancer”

Participants responded sensitively to the circumstances of the actors in the fictitious scenario. Five comments, for example, reflected on Jake’s age -

- *“a six year old child is too young, they won’t get to have a say - the child doesn’t understand and doesn’t know the effect of everything”*
- *“that is a lot to put on a six year old, especially because he hasn’t even been to school yet”*
- *“why would they ask for a six year olds advice? They are six.”*
- *“what advice would a 6 year old give a social worker?”*
- *“they are a bit young to tell us what is going on and how bad the situation is”*

Two reflected on being taken into care when they were very young (one at only two months old).

Sensitivity about Jake as a person allows us to get a sense of how the participants themselves would like to be treated. He should be asked *“how he feels”*. In telling his story, he should be *“able to say it himself, in his own words - so the Judge hears it directly”*, and, he *“needs people to listen”*.

*“Ask the kid how they are feeling through something they like to do.
Like, six year olds like to draw or paint”*

Finding ways to help Jake tell his story also were explored, with the proposal made that he and the other children could be asked to *“write or draw”* their stories [x4] – *“paint or draw a picture on how he/she feels”*.



WHAT DO WE WANT?

Asked what they thought Jake needs from the adults in his life, participants suggested -

- support [x8],
- love [x8]
- to be safe [x3]
- empathy [x3]
- reassurance [x2]
- understanding
- not to be judged

“the child needs to be shown that they are loved and that they can be ok”

Support
Empathy.
Love.
Education.

As will be explored in more detail in later sections, participants understood the inevitable presence of responsible adults in their lives. They discussed this in various ways, including in terms of parental figures, mentors and/or role models and advocates.

“do more freedom”

Participants identified activities or opportunities that they want access to, including -

- sleep overs [x5]
- *“a place to meet playground sit and talk”*
- driving lessons
- *“go places with friends alone”*
- outings (x2)
- skateboarding [x3]
- sport
- *“organise things like CREATE stuff, Hike on a bike”*

- *“allow more contact with friends”*
- *“we can’t talk to other kids in care in a different home”*

Access to and conditions for receipt of pocket money were discussed (including factors such as learning to save and possibly having to undertake work).



“they could give pocket money to you on a gift card in a larger amount so you can actually buy nice things for yourself”

Other desirable things or opportunities were -

- *“a decent house”*
- *clothes [x3]*
- *education (x2)*
- *“roof over their heads”*
- *“backup plan”*
- *pets (x2),*
- *“good food”.*

Three responses indicated that children and young people also might take direct action -

- *“I would run away from home, find water, beg for money, door knock and ask people to take me in so I had shelter for the night”*
- *“I would run away”*
- *“I would stay behind at school and hide from carers”*

MY CULTURE

Participants want the care system to accommodate “culture” (only one seemed to question this – “I’m confused about how someone’s race is relevant to this”).

Culture was discussed primarily in relation to children and young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. The spirit of the feedback can be characterised by the opinion that “they still want to follow their cultural beliefs”.

The scenario family’s possible Indigenous background/culture was linked to factors such as - *family tree, search ancestors, find out about clan and Aboriginal culture.*

It was assumed that the care system should accommodate cultural expectations. An interesting and perceptive comment worth noting is that “sometimes, even if Aboriginal, the parents don’t know the culture anyway, then when the children go into care they have to learn about culture when the parents didn’t even know about it”.

“To be in the job, the social worker should know how to work with Aboriginals”

Family is central, with one comment being that “Aboriginals believe the children should be living with the family (and their family structure is different)”.

The expectation is that social workers and other carers should be culturally competent -

- *“to be in the job, the social worker should know how to work with Aboriginals”*
- *“learn about culture ”[x7] with cultural training necessary to “understand and respect beliefs and values” and be about “Aboriginal business”*
- *“... appreciate Aboriginal people and speak their language”*
- *“find out what Aboriginal group the kids are from”*
- *“be, or find, someone who understands Aboriginal culture and is approachable”*
- *“search the ancestry and find out the family tree”*
- *“appreciate that things like alcohol affect Aboriginal people differently”*

Three participants referred specifically to a need for Aboriginal Workers -

- *“as social workers”*
- *“the government should have Aboriginal workers working with young Aboriginal kids”*
- *“should be an Aboriginal worker that the social worker could get some information from”*



So, cultural support is important, with a number of other opportunities mentioned -

- *“access to Aboriginal workers or visitors”*
- *“there should be Aboriginal groups at school for the children”.*
- *“Aboriginals mentors” [x5]*
- *Aboriginal foster carers (variously described) [x4]*

“Get foster parents that are Aboriginal so the kids are happy and feel normal”

Telling comments were made about the idea that *“the kids should have an Aboriginal mentor”* who -

- *“should make them feel welcome to the new place, get them used to where they are and do fun stuff with them”*
- *“needs to be someone who understands the kids”*
- *“needs to understand and respect the culture, know where the kid comes from and their beliefs”.*

“kids in care feel worthless, they enjoy having a mentor”

Service provision through Aboriginal Family Support Services (AFSS) was mentioned -

- *“the social worker should go to a different service altogether, like AFSS”*
- *“AFSS are more family-orientated than Families SA”*
- *“AFSS have more of a heart than Families SA, they prefer to try to make the family safe for the kids”*

The experience of another participant led to the observation that *“when the kids are Aboriginal, Families SA try harder to sort things out, the kids stay in the family for longer”.*

*- Where am I going?
- Will I see my Parents again?*

ADULTS SHOULD HELP ME

Do something

Participants expect that **adults who are associated with or observe concerning situations should do something.**

“they need to protect children ... it is called child protection and they need to live up to their name”

Seventeen participants said that Pat, the neighbour, should *call or tell someone* about the family problems she had witnessed. Two added that the contact should be with someone you *trust*. Four said it should be with friends, two said to seek advice. Other comments were that while Pat should *“help in any way that she can”* or *“do as much as she can”*, she should not *“get caught helping”*. Pat also should try to get more information about the family and their situation.

Further advice was that Pat could -

- *“contact someone who could make a difference!!!”*
- *“speak up to someone who needs to know about it”*
- *“tell people who could do something”*
- *“she could get someone to come to the house”*
- *“get the kids out of there”, and,*
- *“tell a mandatory reporter - teachers and workers in girls’ and boys’ homes are mandatory reporters”.*

Six participants sought early responsiveness –

- *“as soon as possible” [x2]*
- *“straight away – because a child could get in trouble if you leave them there”*
- *“as soon as you’re worried –If you call earlier they don’t have the chance to get in trouble ”*
- *“get help earlier”.*

Potential contact points nominated were –

- the children’s help line [x7] or the Crisis Care helpline (“*they’re good for being a taxi*”) [x3]
- the police[x8]
- Families SA [x7]
- the school [x7], three of whom added -
 - “*tell school social worker – but what if they never went to school*”
 - “*talk to nearby school Teachers mandated reporters*”
 - “*go to a nearby school to see if they are enrolled*”
- one mentioned youth workers, who – “*have to write everything down - it’s really annoying, but I’m used to it*”
- two recommended going to court or getting a lawyer.

Fourteen comments intimated that Pat, the neighbour, should intervene directly with the mum or the kids - Pat should “*knock on the door, go and check on them to see if they’re ok*”, or “*go over and ask what is happening*”.

The authorities/government also have duties to “*have someone supervise the family*” and/or watch the family.

What should the Principal do?

Asked what they would like the Principal to do, participants gave a clear message that the Principal should **contact external agencies or services**. Those mentioned by name were –

- police [x12]
- various social service agencies - including Crisis Care [x5], Families SA, Kid’s Helpline, Hendercare and Baptist Care
- other counselling/support options also were mentioned (a counsellor [x5]; Contact people who can help parents to look after their children; psychologist; Support services [x3]; “*talk to the nearest child minister*”).
- “*someone you trust*” [x3]

Four participants simply said to “*report it*” (with one adding – “*or make a notification*”), another that the Principal should “*call someone*”.

- CALL CHILDREN'S HELP LINE !
- TALK TO SOME WHO COULD MAKE A DIFFERENCE!!!

Twelve said that the Principal should talk to the parents who, one added, should be asked "why the children are not at school".

Five recommended talking to the children, with proposed inquiries being to ask – is "everything OK at home?" "Do you need any help?" "Do you feel safe?" Is there "anything you need help with?"

A more nuanced answer to what the Principal should do was that "it depends on what is happening". Practical factors then would determine the preferred steps -

- "if the kids are getting hit, I would want the police to come"
- "if it is just yelling, then approach the family first".

Other comments relating to the Principal were -

- ask the Principal to find out more information
- the Principal might not believe the adult (Pat) about what she's heard
- Principal should check if the children are happy in the house
- there's not much the Principal can do, he should contact Families SA

A more direct agenda was proposed – that is, to "get us out or get us out of there as soon as possible".

One participant simply said that – "as a kid, I would have no idea what the Principal would do".

What should schools do?

Eight participants mentioned school attendance, while one simply asked – "will we go to school"? Some additional comment were -

- "if the kids are not going to school, the school should find out why they are not going to school"
- "get kids into school and help as much as they can"

- *“the kids could be given support at school during school hours”*
- *“get kids into school and help as much as they can”*

At least four participants appeared to think that the children might not be able to attend, hence suggestions that the school could send schoolwork home [x3]. One said that the children - *“might not know how to do it because they haven’t been to school before”*.

The school could -

- provide a safe place
- have a safety plan [x2]
- call the kids’ emergency contact
- give supplies to the kids, like stationery
- organise breakfast and/or lunch clubs [x3] - *“get the kids to eat breakfast at school or they could do a lunch club like they have in the city”*
- one opinion was that *“schools don’t talk about these things, like being homeless - they should when the students are in year 7 – year 12 ... it should be like Anglicare, they give out maps of the city where everything is”*.

The school should provide or facilitate access to others for personal support for the children, with some relevant comments in this context being –

- *“tell them we are here for you*
- *“ask them if there is anything they are worried about at home”*
- *“ask if the kids are OK, and, importantly -*
 - *‘do this at recess or lunch, don’t pull the kids out of class”*
 - *‘the school should act casual about it when approaching the kids”*
 - *it’s embarrassing for everyone to know what is happening”*
- *“the school counsellor could help [x2] or a ‘psychologist”*
- *“the kids could go to any service to get information, like Second Story or Shine”*
- *“children to learn skills of their own” [x2]*
- *“someone who understands, has experience and is skilled, who is maybe known to the family, could talk to them”*
- *“give kids strategies and skills to cope - Important to give information about counsellors, supports available for kids”*

“at primary school I barely told anyone ... there is someone from my school here and I didn’t realise she was a foster kid”



The school experience

One comment provides a focus for this consideration of the school experience – *“in care children should be given the best education and the best environment”*.

“it’s hard when friends ask how many mums and dads you have – you have to say you have heaps”

Negative aspects of going to school were identified –

- *“I’ve been picked on for years about being a foster child since Reception, this year I finally stood up to it”*
- *“It’s hard when friends ask how many mums and dads you have – you have to say you have heaps”*
- *“it is hard at school because you have to tell everyone and they ask why. When you tell someone you are fostered, they ask why and they tell everyone. Mum rocked up at OSH – I used to tell a few people and I realised mum was telling everyone about how and why I was in foster care. It is important I get to tell people”*.
- *“I have not told people at school I am fostered. I just say I live with my cousins as I didn’t want to live with my mum and dad”*
- *“I don’t want everyone knowing about it” (that I’m fostered)*

- *“at primary school I barely told anyone. There is someone from my school here and I didn’t realise she was a foster kid”*
- *“form signing takes time”* (when you are a foster child).

“in care children should be given the best education and the best environment”

There were more positive comments -

- *“I have not been bullied but the whole school knows – they are there for me”*
- *“I don’t tell the full story, no need to. Tell a couple of friends you trust”*
- *“in primary school I told more people as I had the principal’s support”*
- *“last year I had no support. The principal changed everything”*
- *“I was bullied about other things than being a foster child”*
- *“people ask what being a foster child is about. They query if its adoption. My friends responded ok”.*

LOOK AFTER MY FAMILY

A strong theme was participant concern for their family. Whatever has gone wrong does not seem to override these bonds.

While two indicated that they wanted the *“whole situation to not occur”*, there was concern to maintain family links and for family member issues to be addressed. Participants wanted siblings to stay together, a desire for *“more family contact”* and/or *“more access with parents and support to families that the child is living with”*.

Reflective comments referred to implications had the family not separated – *“If I had stayed with my parents I would not have ended up the person I am now”* and *“it might not have ended up so good”*.

One participant raised the situation of a young person in care who also is a parent, suggesting that the system should – *“try harder to keep young mums with their babies”*, that there should be *“care plan meetings with parents and always give them one chance”*, and that a young mum should at least *“have one night with their new baby”*.

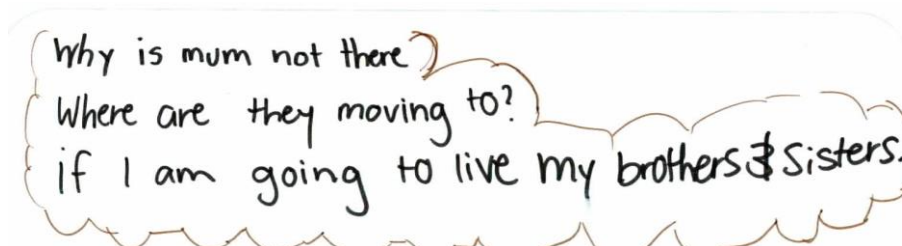
“the reality is that some parents aren’t capable of being with their kids”

What could supportive adults do? (... the importance of siblings)

The discussion scenario invited participants to consider what they would want the social worker to arrange if they were ‘Jake’. The overwhelming requirement was for ongoing contact/relationship with the family. This was expressed in various ways –

- two young people simply referred to *“contact”*
- the term *“access”* was used eight times (alone or with respect to – family, brothers and sisters, or parents)
- other ways of stating this desire for ongoing contact were –
 - *“to see if they can see their brothers, sisters and parents (family)”*
 - *“to contact his parents every week or day”*
 - *“want to see Mum”*
 - *“to see your family again”*
 - three participants mentioned being able to phone their parents

- one young person expressed a similar concern in a slightly different way – “I also would want them to help support us and tell us if we will ever go home to our parents again”.



Eleven comments specifically sought clarity about **ongoing contact with siblings**. Questions asked in relation to this were –

- “will we be split apart”
- “what’s going on with the other kids”
- “what’s going on with their family”
- “my brother keeps asking when I am coming home”.

“I would want the social worker to put me with all my siblings”

Other comments also were relevant to maintaining sibling relationships –

- “would want to live in foster care - not many foster carers would have all four kids”
- “want to live with other siblings – would feel more comfortable”
- “it would just be a necessity to live with your siblings”
- “I would want the social worker to put me with all my siblings”
- “the social worker should arrange for the kid to live with his brothers and sisters”
- “would want to make sure the siblings are happy where they are”
- “I also would want to see my siblings all the time”.

Comments broadly about/to the parents

Nine participants asked variations on – “will we see our parents again”? Five added -

- “how long they are going to be there and if they will ever see their parents again?”
- “you want to know how long until you can go back to your parents”
- “when are we going to see Mum and Dad? Love and connection with mum”

- *“can we go back to our house?”*
- *“can we go back and live with our parents?”*

There was a focus on the parents’ behaviour in relation to what has occurred but also as important for could still happen to the family. One suggestion was that *“the visitor should talk to both parents about what they should change to have their children back”*. Others supported this idea, but noted that some things needed to change -

- *“dad should be trying his hardest to quit drinking and mum should be getting parenting therapy”*
- *“couples therapy, parents therapy”*
- *“the parents might need to separate”*

“Not everyone is perfect 😊”

Other feedback reflected on the choices or options facing parents -

- *“they could ask for support”*
- *“they could receive advice and be told if they don’t do it correctly the children will be taken away / removed”*
- *“they might need help to care for kids like counselling and advice” [x4]*
- *“they might treat their children like their parents treated them – they don’t know how to be good parents”*
- two participants referred to attending school, while another adding that they should *“worry about children safety and education”*
- *“I’d want to know if parents want to try and change for kids and they are getting support they need and trying to support themselves and get us back. I don’t want to know if they didn’t want to try because that’d be heartbreaking”*
- *“even parents who are physically or emotionally abusive, you still want to see them because they’ll always be a part of you”* (with a fellow participant noting – *“that is a gnarly situation – very difficult”*)
- *“the family should get help before the kids are taken away”*
- *“mental health might be the problem - authorities need to know that and help the family”*
- *“do a safety plan before removal to see if the parent is committed - if the parent then breaks the rules, take the kids away”*
-

- *“some kids don’t want to be taken away - they don’t want to be put in a different environment with strangers”*
- *“kids want to know everything”*
- *“they want to know if parents are getting support”*
- *“kids want to know if parents are on drugs when they’re asleep”*
- *“want to know if parents on drugs”*
- *“not many people know if parents are getting help”*
- *“talk to the social worker” (about what is going on with parents)*
- *“not everyone is perfect 😊”*
- *“the reality is that some parents aren’t capable of being with their kids”*
- *“that [being with the parents] does not always happen”*
- *“I would want to know where my parents are going for me”*
- *“they would want to be with their parents – that’s what any kids wants – to be with their parents”*
- *“I would want to know if my parents would try to get us back”*
- *“I would want people would help my family”*
- *“access supported”*
- *“the children should not be lied to ... they should be told that they can’t live with both mum and dad, but maybe they could live with mum on her own”.*

“I’d want to know if parents want to try and change for kids and they are getting support they need and trying to support themselves and get us back. I don’t want to know if they didn’t want to try because that’d be heartbreaking”

Concern for Sal, the Mum

Discussion of the scenario led to thirteen inquiries about the situation and well-being of Sal, the mother - *“is she safe?” “where is she?” “how is she?”* Comments also reflected upon the pressure upon Sal and the choices she could make –

- *“the child should be able to see the effort mum is going to and improvements mum is making”*
- *“I would want to help Sal understand that she has a lot of support service and that she don’t need to be scared of her boyfriends”*

- *“I also would want to help Sal understand that her family, meaning children, are more important than her boyfriend”*
- *“I also would want my mother to try and get us back before putting her relationships first*
- *“I want to know mum is getting support ”*
- *“so realise where went wrong and could change how they look after kids so they can go back. Kids don’t want to be taken away – they want to stay. The parents need to treat the kids right so they can get them back”*
- *“change is hard for parents to make if they have been through a lot in their childhood”*
- *“I want to know good news not bad news. If mum is going in a bad direction, I don’t want to know”*
- *“see that the mother is going to drug testing or seeing a psychologist”*
- *“the child needs to know that the mother is trying”*
- *“if the child is really young, this would come when the child sees the mother, from the effort the mother makes to connect with the child”*

One simply said *“love and connection with mum”*.

Ideas about what might help Sal resolve her problems included -

- *“counselling”*
- *“a family friend could be contacted or support agencies could help”*
- *“talk to the Mum”*
- *“helping support Sal with all the problems she may be having”*
- *“try and help Sal connecting with her children”*

“change is hard for parents to make if they have been through a lot in their childhood”

Some feedback considered the implications should Sal be from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background -

- *“the family might feel more comfortable talking to Aboriginal workers”*
- *“mother could be worried about white people”*
- *“help her to get to know her culture”*
- *“talk to mum about what Place she is from”*

- *“talk to mum about ancestors”*
- *“find out what area she is from – she might be more comfortable speaking another language – maybe would get more from her”*

What about the Dad?

References to the father were -

- *“Is Dad going to jail?”*
- *“what if Mum is the bad one ? There might be a reason that Dad is going off at her*
- *“but he is going off at the kids all the time as well”*
- *“to be fair, no kids would like their Dad going off at them and their Mum”*
- *“Dad could be drunk when he is going off at Mum and the kids, he might be an alcoholic”*
- seven comments specifically indicated a desire for dad to stop drinking, two suggested that AA meetings might assist.
- awareness of complex factors possibly influencing parental behaviour is attested by the following comments –
 - *“could be drugs as well to be fair – might not just be alcohol”*
 - *“could be mental problems too, and other stuff that had happened to them in their life”*
 - *“getting his kids taken away might not help the Dad – it might get worse with the stress and stuff and the kids might end up in care”*

A participant in one focus group suggested that – *“the child should continue to have supervised access with dad whilst they are in Families SA care”*.

Responses to the facilitator’s question “what should the access be like?” were -

- *“access should be private, but there should be a back-up plan if something goes wrong”*
- *“it has to feel safe, connected and natural”*
- *“the supervision should be from behind mirrored glass”*
- *“the parents should have to work towards unsupervised access ”*
- *“they could meet at somewhere like a playground with someone to supervise the kids whilst the mother and father talk”*
- *“as part of reunification, there could be respite for the children overnight whilst the mother and father try to fix their relationship”*.

THE PEOPLE WHO LOOK AFTER ME

Many comments were made about carers and other adults.

“A good worker will let you do stuff but also make sure you are safe”

“no social worker gets back to you”

Who are these adults?

Participants indicated the diversity of adults involved in their lives in care -

- social workers
- youth workers
- residential care workers (see below)
- foster carers (see below)
- *“people from”* the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community
- advocates - *“someone could represent him through an advocate - but an advocate needs to know the right way to get the information too”*
- role models
- lawyers
- The Guardian – (*“the child should go to the Office of the Guardian”* although another noted - *“the office of the guardian doesn’t do anything, there is a book with rights but it’s not fair”*)

“the government should have Aboriginal workers working with young Aboriginal kids”

General characteristics

Participants referred to the attributes that they want in carers and professional workers who support them in the care system. The desire to be treated with respect already has been noted, with other desirable characteristics being -

- caring [x 9] - *“someone willing to look after them”*
- someone who will keep them *“safe”* [x9]
- professional [x 5] - with a *“clear bond”* [x 2]

- *“clear with boundaries”* and who *“can be close, but not too close”*
- good communication [x 10]
- be *“nice”* or *“good”* or *“loving”* [x 9]
- fairness [x 3]
- *“wise”*, thoughtful [x3]
- *“experienced”*
- accessible [x 6] – *“the carer should be able to say “here is my number, call me anytime” even if you have moved”*
- *“consistent”* or *“reliable”* [x 8] *“you need to know “my key worker will be back tomorrow”*
- *“helpful”* [x2] *“make us feel like they are there to help you”*
- *“fun”* [x5], lets them be kids
- *“motivated”*
- *“sensitive”* [x2]
- *“open-minded”*, amenable to the young person’s input [x4]
- trustworthy [x3]– *“you should be able to tell them anything”*
- forgiving

“I get love and support from them and feel like they acknowledge me”

“I would want the carers to try understand me and not yell or scream at me because it would bring up bad experience”

“... be there, be consistent and available”

Seeing the adults as real people

Participants saw the adults in their lives as people with personalities and experiences that influence their caring role.

Three young people said that the best workers would themselves have been in care, for example – *“social workers with experience in care and who have been through it themselves”*. Another said they should *“have qualities that suit children”*.

Several were curious, seeking “background information” about the adults and wanting them to “share their stories”.

They expect social workers and other adults in their lives to be culturally competent.

Some want to engage with younger adults -

- *“a younger social worker, not a 70 year old”*
- *“young but experienced, full of wisdom which is hard to find”*
- *“age appropriate”.*

“I had one worker who was great - he was like a Dad to me”

Be on my side

At least nine comments indicate that the children and young people expect key adults to be on their side -

- *“stick up for the kids”*
- *“be on their side”*
- *“someone fight for the children”*
- *“advocate ”*
- *“put the children before their own lives”.*

RESIDENTIAL CARE – THE EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICE

Valuable contributions drew on participant experience of living in residential care.

Continuity of adults in their lives

They drew attention to the problem of discontinuity of care and relationships -

- *“having the same carer is important”*
- *“carer would be the same – I had a carer who was my favourite, and then they just left ... shift workers is just hard”*
- *“I wish we had Annette 24/7 ... Hendercare, all they do is say no.”*
- *“I got close with a carer and then I was moved. I don’t like that.”*

Need for adequate/more resources

Some participants recognised that the quality of their care depended on **access to resources**. Three areas drew particular comments -

- “more money” for Families SA [x3]
 - “It’s all about the money”
 - “we lose so many residential carers because there is no money”
- “more workers”/ Carers [x2]
- homes [x4]
 - “have better houses to live in, you can tell when it is a Families SA house”
 - “have an inviting and lovely house”
 - “more inviting homes and carers”.

Two young people referred to “time” (i.e for the worker to be able to do their job well).

“a good worker will let you do stuff but also make sure you are safe”

*more resources
siblings remain together
friends over
More family contact.
equal.*

Operational practices

The impact of **worker shifts/rosters** generated many comments, including -

- “our outings are controlled by shifts. We always have to get back for the shift change”

- *“in resi care for three years - three shifts of workers”*
- *“staff work shifts. One worker has been on night shift for three years. I trust her. There are always at least three carers – key workers. The carers are always awake. There is an alarm around the house. There are certain rules – you have your own bedroom – it’s not a jail”*
- *“in resi care the night time carers are loud. They watch TV and wake you up, then tell you to go back to sleep”*
- *“shift changes are hard – you wake up with a different person there. Not sure who will be there in the morning”*
- *“when we went to the Royal Show we could only stay for an hour and a half because of the shift change. Other kids got to stay for the whole day”.*

“shift changes are hard – you wake up with a different person there ... not sure who will be there in the morning”

Other residential care practices indicated some **frustration with the nature and impact of constraints on resident activities** -

- *“be more flexible”*
- *“the other day we had a Hendercare carer who could not drive the car, so we could not go anywhere”*
- *“there is always lots of asking the bosses what you can do in resi care and nation building – eg for sleepovers it takes two weeks to get permission”*
- *“everything always has to be written in the log book”*
- *“we want to do something and time that we could be doing it is wasted writing in the log book”*
- *“you have to ask a million people to do anything – the social worker asks the senior who asks the big boss”*
- *“last minutes things cannot be organised, like normal sleepovers”*
- *“get permission to go places”*
- *“we should be allowed Facebook – we get told you have to be 18, some kids get told 16”.*
- *“when I was in resi care I was responsible enough to go to the park and stuff – I was nearly going to get a phone when I left”.*

“you need to be able to have a good relationship with at least one worker”

General Comments about residential care

These quotes illustrate the variable experiences of residential care -

- *“sometimes being in resi-care is good”*
- *“good resi care can be fun”*
- *“I don’t like residential care”*
- *“resi care is hard, but it is fun at the same time”*
- *“residential care is different and confusing”*
- *“Resi care homes should be better – more like a normal family.”*
- *“Residential Care isn’t that bad. I’ve been there for six years. You don’t have parents but you do have staff” (drawing the comment - “that’s freaky, why don’t you have parents?”)*



At least four young people referred to moving -

- *“when you move it sucks”*
- *“I want to be consulted if I have to move”*
- *“if I am moved, I want visits first and I don’t want to be immediately cut off”*
- *“if in resi care, make sure you don’t move constantly – that sucks”.*

Participants had broad perceptions about the residential care system -

- *“not all residential homes are teenagers”*
- *“people don’t want teenagers much, they want little babies and five year olds. All the people who aren’t picked up go into a home together”*
- *“things change a lot depending on who the carers are”*
- *“I have lived in Residential Care for four years. I am about to transition to independent living which is more like living by myself”*
- *“in Residential Care there is enough people to look after you who can meet your needs – to make sure you have shampoo and get you to school”.*
- *“I have lots of freedom for a 14 year old. I catch the bus to school and back”*
- *“carers are supportive and help with anything you need help with”*
- *“carers do their job better and treat us equally”*
- *“someone who reads the case notes of the child”*
- *“your problems, or if you do something wrong, are shared with other workers when they shouldn’t be”*
- *“You don’t have a say about what carers you have and you don’t get a say about social workers”.*

“people don’t want teenagers much, they want little babies and five year olds. All the people who aren’t picked up go into a home together”

FOSTER CARERS

“... as long as the child is aware and the carer is a good communicator and clear with boundaries and honest. Some say you will live with them forever and then you are moved.”

Fairness and a relationship to parenting

Twelve of the young people linked the foster carer role specifically to parenting and/or emphasised being treated fairly -

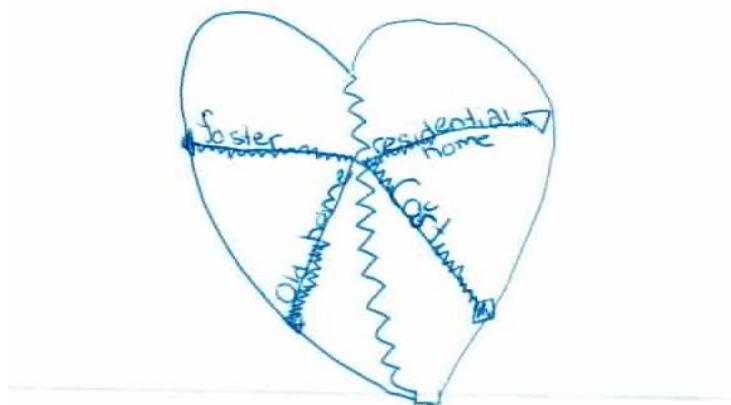
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- *"I've been with the same foster carer since I was three. My mum is patient with me and takes me to appointments"*
- *"I don't call her mum but she is my mum. She is now my guardian"*
- *"treat them like your own kids"*
- *"that the foster carers treat me like they love me, and like I'm their actual kid"*
- *"treat me like one of their own kids"*
- *"I want one that gives an understanding that they aren't Mum and Dad but they love them"*
- *"a parental figure"*
- *"carers won't let us call them Mum and Dad"*
- *"don't spoil one kid and not the other"*
- *"not play favourite"*
- *"not play favourites with their own children"*

"I would want a carer who is very caring, funny, and can help with important things"

Having to move between homes

One participant comment suggested a disappointing experience of moving while in care – *"... as long as the child is aware and the carer is a good communicator and clear with boundaries and honest. Some say you will live with them forever and then you are moved"*.



Another said that *“if you have to move, the carer should be able to contact you at the new place - the carer should be able to say “here is my number, call me anytime” even if you have moved”*.

Foster carer characteristics

Attributes sought in a foster carer included -

- *“I would want a carer who is very caring, funny, and can help with important things”*
- *“I’ve known my carers for a long time, so I have good relationships with all of them”*
- *“someone that has time for the children”*
- *“they let children decide what to do”*
- *“willing to listen to you because if you have problems at school they can help you”* .

Active engagement was mentioned -

- *“plays video games with you, likes outdoors stuff and is easy going”*
- two others also specifically advocated that they should *“do activities”*.

One youngster proposed *“Yoda”* as a model carer. Another favourite carer was mentioned – *“I liked him he was like my Dad. I want an Aussie bloke, that cares, that takes me fishing”*.

Miscellaneous comments

Two suggestions were made about the process of fostering -

- *“I would make sure the children always had the same foster family”*
- *“where I am now we organise the access ourselves – without Families SA being involved. It is great”*.

Two others referred to nation building homes -

- *“in foster care you get a lot more stuff than in nation building homes”*
- *“I had foster care ages ago, but they got sick, so went into a nation building house, then just before Christmas got a foster carer again”*.

ATTACHMENT 1

GCYP and CREATE – Consultation for Royal Commission

Focus Group Session held on 25 March 2015

CONSULTATION ‘SCENES’ & QUESTIONS

Scene 1

Pat lives next door to a family of six, four children and mum and dad. Pat is worried about the children because she hears dad going off at them, and their mum. Mum rarely goes outside of the house and Pat thinks that the oldest child who is about six hasn't been to school for a while, if ever.

If you were one of these children, what would you want Pat to do?

Scene 2

Pat has children at the local school and so she talks to the Principal about her concerns. The Principal thanks Pat for the information and says that he is aware of the family. He tells Pat that he will follow it up with the education Welfare Officer.

If you were one of the children, what would you like the Principal to do?

Is there anything else the school could do?

Scene 3

Pat sees mum outside the house a few weeks later. Mum is very upset because the authorities have removed all four children and she has to go to court to have them returned. Pat learns that mum is called Sal. Sal is scared and angry. She is scared that she won't see her children again and also scared of their dad. Sal tells Pat that the police told her she has to leave the dad but she doesn't know where she would go.

If you were one of Sal's children what would you want to know?

Scene 4

The children are split up with the two youngest in a foster home, and the other two in a residential home. A visitor from the court comes to the six year old and talks about the court trial. The six year old child's name is Jake. Jake says that he wants to live with his mum and dad but wants the fighting to stop and for his dad to stop drinking.

How should Jake's views be heard in the court? How should the views of the other children be heard?

If you were Jake what would you be needing from the adults at this time?

Scene 5

The social worker assigned to the family learns that Sal is Aboriginal but not from the Adelaide area. The social worker is not sure what to do.

If you were one of the children, what would you advise the social worker to do?

Scene 6

Sal won't leave the children's dad and so the court decides it is unsafe for the children to be with either mum or dad. The social workers have to now arrange long term care for the children and contact with family (parents and brothers, sisters, and a grandmother).

If you were Jake (the oldest boy) what would you want the social worker to arrange?

How would you describe the best social worker Jake could have?

Scene 7

The two youngest children stay on with the foster carer, but Jake and his brother move to another residential house until a family can be found for them to live with.

- Can you describe the best carer in the world for the two youngest?
- Can you describe the best residential worker for Jake and his brother?

Input by the children and young people did not always respond to the two categories identified in the questions (carer or residential worker). For this reason a third category was added in the report – 'support adults in general'.

Scene 8 - 'One Last Question'

If you were in charge of everything, what would you make different for Jake and his family?

it's a
metaphore

