



When the system does what it's designed to do

At the Centre for Relational Care, we talk often about the importance of real relationships. Underneath that, we're also naming how the systems we work within can make it harder for those relationships to hold. We're asking how these systems behave, why they resist change, and what it takes to shift them.

Child protection is a complex adaptive system. It's dynamic, interconnected, and remarkably resilient. But that resilience often protects the status quo, even when it causes disconnection, disempowerment, and harm to the very children and families it's meant to support.

Rather than seeing the system as broken, we can understand it as doing exactly what it was designed for, and is still conditioned to do. If we want different outcomes, we need strong, progressive policy and practice that seeks to shift the deeper assumptions, beliefs, and dynamics that drive system behaviour.

In a new thought piece on our website, I explore why traditional reforms struggle to stick, using the lens of complex adaptive systems. The system tends to self-correct, absorbing change and reinforcing familiar norms and mindsets. Real progress comes not from controlling outcomes, but from changing the conditions that shape them.

The piece unpacks four key systems ideas, with practical strategies, to help guide this shift:

- **Families and communities are living systems:** Support comes not from control, but from investing in natural, adaptive networks of care. Funding what's already working in community is a powerful place to start.
- **Organisations are self-maintaining systems:** Organisational culture shapes what's possible. Changing language, assumptions and values will help relational practice take root and grow.
- **Systems resist change through deep foundations:** Surfacing the deeper assumptions and colonial legacies that still shape the system. Truth-telling and lived experience agency unsettle these foundations, clearing the ground for a more human, connection-based paradigm to flourish.
- **Feedback loops reflect what we choose to value and measure:** Current feedback loops reward compliance. To shift behaviour, we must value what matters to children and families, because what we measure shapes how we care.

This piece sits alongside the thinking and work of many others – young people, families, First Nations leaders, practitioners, researchers and communities – who are building toward a future where connection is at the centre of care. This transformation won't be linear or predictable, but it's necessary. Because every child deserves to feel safe, secure, and loved.



Sophi Bruce
Sophi Bruce, CEO

Young Person Working Group: centering lived experience

With guidance from CRC's Young Person Advocate Emily Hikaiti, we have established a working group of young people who have experienced foster care. Our first working group, held in May, focused on building trust, sharing stories, and exploring what relational care means from their perspective.

The word human came up again and again. Participants in the group spoke about how much it matters when caseworkers are authentic and relatable - not just following rules. One young person shared how they weren't allowed to attend a relative's funeral because they weren't "blood related," despite the deep bond. It's a clear example of how systems can overlook the relationships that matter most.

We're grateful to Emily and the young people for their honesty, insight and leadership. We're excited to continue partnering with young people to push for a care system guided by lived experience and grounded in real connection.



CRC Youth Advisor Lachlan Hobman (cheered on by Emily Hikaiti) receiving an Inspiration Award at the Central Coast Youth Week Awards in April for his leadership and advocacy work in the care space

Reimagining public services with a relational focus

In May the Centre for Relational Care and The Possibility Partnership co-hosted a roundtable for government with UK reformer Mark Smith, whose *Liberated Method* is helping shift public services from transactional models to relational ways of working.

Mark discussed how better outcomes can be achieved by working differently, with relationships and connection at the centre, rather than by always trying to do more. He also showed that around 50% of effective interventions are 'system agnostic' - things that can be done immediately without systemic change. These include "gloriously ordinary" activities like:

- sitting with someone during a medical appointment
- helping furnish a flat
- sorting benefits
- registering someone to vote

Mark also shared a striking case study: a man who had 3,500 interactions with public services over nine years - 800 assessments, 5,000 professionals, and costs nearing £2 million. What changed things wasn't more services, but a shift to relational support focused on what mattered to him. Within two years, his life stabilised - and costs fell below £5,000.

We'll keep supporting efforts like these - connecting people across systems, sharing what works, and making space for more human approaches to take root. It's part of a growing body of evidence that relational approaches are not just more human - they are also more effective, more sustainable and save money.

The Liberated Method was highlighted in the Australian Public Policy Institute report (formerly JMI), a collaborative project with the CRC. You can find it on our website.



Let's get REAL about relationships: a way to self-reflect

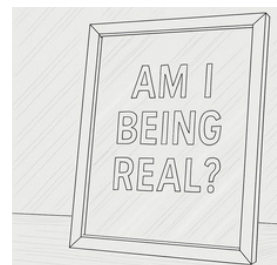
"Relationships are complicated, but things that work towards relationship are not complicated. Good relational health practices are small, repetitive, positive, enduring, adaptable."

It's the small, thankless things that build up relationship over time, like sandstone."

– Brendan New, Clinical Psychologist and CRC Advisory Network member

Our Young Person Working Group, along with the CRC Advisory Network and our growing community of relational care advocates, are helping to guide our thinking on REAL – a self-check we launched recently to help us consider how we show up in our work through:

R - Relationships
E - Empathy
A - Attitude
L - Language



It's not a framework. It's not a checklist. It's an invitation to reflect on whether our behaviours and actions truly prioritise a child's need for lasting, human connection.

Read the full article on our website and let us know if it resonates with you and your team.

Backing First Nations Leadership

The Centre for Relational Care was invited to present at AbSec's Quarterly Sector Forum in February alongside inspiring Aboriginal-led initiatives including the Dubbo Grannies Group, Waminda Women's Health, and Orange Aboriginal Medical Service. Our Elder in Residence, Aunty Rhonda Dixon-Grovenor, opened with a poem and reflections on the need for change.

Our Chair Jarrod Wheatley outlined a vision for a Child Connection System grounded in relational care, and CEO Sophi Bruce shared insights from the Supporting Children and Families to Flourish report, our collaborative project with the Australian Public Policy Institute (formerly James Martin Institute).

With First Nations children disproportionately impacted in child protection, the report backs Aboriginal-led reform that consistently calls for greater Aboriginal control and decision-making.



L-R CEO Sophi Bruce, Aunty Rhonda Dixon-Grovenor, and Jarrod Wheatley at the AbSec Quarterly Forum



Conversations on relational care

- **Pressroom Philanthropy podcast 22 April:** Our Co-founder Bernie Shakeshaft speaks about what it means to take a community-centred approach, where activities and relationships help build a network of belonging.
- **Impact Policy AU podcast Episode 33:** Our Chair Jarrod Wheatley discusses the fundamentally flawed approach of our current child protection system with Impact Policy's Managing Director Sam Alderton-Johnson.
- **A Home and Healing for Every Child podcast Season 2 Episode 1:** Our Young Persons Advocate Emily Hikaiti on her journey through the care system and what needs to shift to truly support healing and stability.

Shifting the focus from protection to connection



CRC Chair Jarrod Wheatley presenting at the QFCC Roundtable in Brisbane

In June, CRC Chair Jarrod Wheatley presented at the 8th National Child Protection Forum in Brisbane, calling for a shift from a risk-focused protection model to a Child Connection System - one that puts relationships, belonging, and community at the centre.

While in Brisbane, Jarrod took part in a roundtable on embedding relational practice in the care sector with the Queensland Government, hosted by the Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC). This follows the Government's recent announcement of a Commission of Inquiry into the state's child safety system.

Jarrod led a thought-provoking discussion about the CRC's work to put relationships at the heart of the child protection system through: reframing risk; putting people before paperwork; measuring what is meaningful to children and families; and challenging the one-size-fits all approach to boundaries. The roundtable followed the Government's recent announcement of a Commission of Inquiry into the state's child safety system.

Out and about: Learning from relational approaches in action

Over the past few months, we've had the chance to get out and visit some incredible organisations that put relationships at the centre of their work.

We spent time with the OurSPACE team at the Australian Childhood Foundation for a conversation about what it really means to work relationally, and how connection can be sustaining, not draining. Their reflections on caseworkers having space to bring their "soul" to the role really resonated.

At CREATE Foundation, we spoke with the team about the value of lived experience and CREATE's work in amplifying young people's voices in care.

We also visited Mt Druitt Learning Ground, a place where relationships and belonging are at the heart of how success is measured. Young people come back years later, often with children of their own – showing the strength of the connections built there.



With BackTrack Youth Works, we've been holding regular meetings to learn more about their relational practice in action and explore how we can support their growing Tracker Network - a community of programs across NSW and Queensland inspired by BackTrack.

And with Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter (FISH) we've been engaging about family preservation and the relational repair needed when families are drawn into the child protection system. We're also preparing for a joint webinar on how language shapes experiences for children and families in the care system.

We're enjoying building links with international organisations that support relational practice including: the Relationships Project (UK), working to create a better society by putting relationships at the heart of services and system; and VOYCE - Whakarongo Mai (New Zealand), a national advocacy organisation amplifying the voices of children and young people in care.

We're so grateful to all who shared their time with us.



[linkedin.com/company/centre-for-relational-care/](https://www.linkedin.com/company/centre-for-relational-care/)



centreforrelationalcare.org.au