

What's not working



Surveillance
Investigation
Reporting

A better way

Connection
Trust
Community



A shift to trust, community and possibility

At our recent workshop with grassroots organisations and lived experience advocates on reimagining out-of-home care, someone said something that stayed with me: "The state isn't acting as a parent would."

It's a simple observation, but cuts to the heart of what we heard throughout the day. The current system is designed to protect itself rather than nurture children, parents, and families. It privileges 'experts' over those with lived experience. It sees parents as risks rather than resources. And it rewards compliance and silence over genuine connection.

This isn't because people working in the system don't care. It's because the system itself is built on foundations and incentives that make relational care difficult to sustain. The participants named how it's designed for silos, not learning. It promotes fear and competition for funding rather than collaboration. Workers feel restricted. Children and young people learn to be performative. Parents are blamed, shamed, and punished.

The story we tell ourselves is that we're "saving children." But the truth many of us know is that we're often causing more harm and intergenerational trauma.

What could be different

The good news is that there's a vision for what an alternative could look like - and, as the workshop made clear, it starts with some fundamental shifts:

From judgement to trust and support. Where the starting point is from a place of shared humanity. Where help-seeking is encouraged, not penalised.

From individualism to community. Back to the roots of "it takes a village to raise a child." Where we invest in families and community networks that support long-term relationships. Where First Nations ways of being in community are centred in decisions about First Nations children.

From compliance to connection. Where we measure what matters to the people who are most important, not just what's easy to count. Where relationship is understood as essential, and relational deprivation is seen as a real and significant risk.

From fear to possibility. Where we remove the fear of removal and judgement. Where we shift real power to communities. Where we move from "reportable" to "supportable."

This is both urgent and challenging. Yet it's do-able with meaningful co-design. It means reorientating support and incentives to unlock and strengthen relational capacity including multi-year funding, community-first approaches, birth support and universal care, and support going into homes rather than extracting children.

It means thinking differently about our roles. It means acknowledging that leaning in to this more human way of working is messy, imperfect and often painful but will keep kids safer through connection and real relationships.

Moving our campaign forward

The honesty and depth of reflection being shared with us is tangible and heartfelt. Our work continues to be shaped by personal and lived experiences, professional insights and hopes for what could be different.

We're taking all of this forward as we build the case for a Child Connection System - not just as a concept, but as something practical and achievable.

Because ultimately, this is all about what we would and wouldn't do in our own family. And that clarity can guide us toward the system children and families deserve.



Sophi Bruce
Sophi Bruce, CEO

Naming the truths, imagining a different future

In October, the CRC brought together changemakers, grassroots leaders and advocates for a day of reflection, learning and action to reimagine a relational alternative to today's child protection system. The workshop, held in Sydney, explored big questions about the values shaping the current out-of-home care system, the narratives and incentives we need to shift, and what a community-led care system - built on trust and connection rather than surveillance and rules - could look like.

Participants named how risk and control is taking priority over nurturing relationships. We heard how 'expert' voices dominate lived experience, compliance is rewarded over connection, and the "saving children" narrative continues to mask trauma and harm, particularly for First Nations families.

A shared vision emerged for a system grounded in trust, community and connection. Ideas for moving forward included real stories, experiential installations, documentary events and conversation spaces to help communities imagine a new way.



Visit the Knowledge Hub on our website to download a Summary Pack from the workshop.

An evening of connection and shared purpose

Following the workshop, we shared an evening of connection and storytelling, led by a Welcome to Country from Aunty Rhonda Dixon-Grovenor, joined by around 80 people from our wider CRC community.



The gathering brought together people we have been recently connecting with around relational care - practitioners, supporters, advocates and friends - creating space for honest conversations about the challenges and hope for a more relational future for children and families.

BackTrack and CRC Co-founder Bernie Shakeshaft led a lively discussion about our individual and collective purpose - our 'whys' for wanting change. Our Young Persons Advisory Group members Emily Hikaiti and Lachlan Hobman shared their experiences of 'care', reminding us this is not an abstract system but a set of rules and procedures that can lead to tangible, emotional harm.

Thank you to everyone who joined us, for your insights, energy and openness. We look forward to welcoming our growing community to similar events in the future centreforrelationalcare.org.au/join-us

The human truth behind out-of-home care

In recent months our *Humans of Care* series has shared stories from care workers, young people, foster carers and parents - moments where relationships transformed outcomes, and times where they were overshadowed by procedure or risk-aversion. These voices show both the impact of relational care and the cost when it's missing.

Clear themes emerged: rigid policies that isolate rather than protect; judgement that undermines parents and carers; the need for young people to simply be kids; and the way

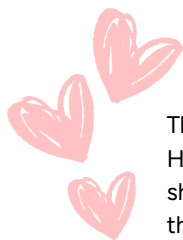
good relational work often requires practitioners to push back against systems that make connection difficult.

All these stories challenge us to question the system's rules and procedures when they just don't make sense. In protecting itself, is the system asking people to suppress their humanity, which is the very thing that makes real care possible?

View *Humans of Care* on our website. If you'd like to share your story, email change@centreforrelationalcare.org.au



For his story, Jordan chose this photo of a Beanie Bear that he's had since he was a child.



Words that Wound to Words that Heal: why language matters

The CRC and Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter hosted a webinar exploring how language shapes the experiences of children and families in the care system.

Guided by people with lived experience, the discussion highlighted how everyday words – like *case*, *final orders* or *hard to engage* – can reinforce distance, fear and powerlessness. Their insights reminded us that language is never neutral; it signals our values, our assumptions and the kind of relationships we offer.

The conversations from the webinar led to a new CRC–FISH resource, *What Sits Behind Language*, developed with input from parents, young people and peer support workers.

The resource unpacks the attitudes beneath common “system” language and offers alternatives that honour dignity, clarity and connection. It aims to provoke thought, and is by no means an exhaustive list. It’s part of an ongoing conversation happening across the sector, and we welcome any ideas and feedback.

Read the full resource and download the infographic on the Knowledge Hub on our website.

Strengthening relational practice: CRC and ACWA collaboration

The CRC and the Association of Children’s Welfare Agencies (ACWA) have been engaging with leaders across the out-of-home care sector to strengthen the conditions for relational practice. In October the CRC and ACWA co-hosted a roundtable with Hon Kate Washington MP, NSW Minister for Families and Communities, bringing together service providers, government and regulators, along with former Governor-General David Hurley AC DSC (Retd).

Key opportunity areas emerged, including: shifting language; measuring what matters; reshaping organisational culture; and reframing risk. Central to all of this is valuing lived experience – listening to children and families and asking, “What have we done with what we heard?”

Building on the workshop, a joint CRC–ACWA research project is underway, combining a sector-wide survey and in-depth discussions, to help identify what enables and what hinders relational work.



This will guide a longer collaborative effort to co-design practical strategies so relational practice can become the norm, not the exception.

Being more human in policy and social change

The Centre for Relational Care recently joined several roundtable conversations on how Australia can take a more human-centred approach to policy and social change.

At an ANZSOG roundtable with UK public policy thinker James Plunkett, we explored what it means to “govern human” in complex systems. The discussion highlighted the need to balance technocratic approaches with ways of working that prioritise relationships, connection and continuous learning.

Key themes included: enabling adaptive, outcome-focused regulation; empowering communities to lead solutions; and investing in experimentation and learning.

We also joined the *Framing the Early Years for Social Change* CEO Roundtable, focused on mindset shifts and building narrative strategies to strengthen public understanding of what children and families need, informed by research such as the *Measuring Early Childhood Mindsets in Australia* project.

A workshop with UK advisor Charlie Leadbeater brought together government and innovation leaders working in systems change. We explored how generative leadership can use well-timed and place-focused innovations to spark deep system shifts across governance, policy and service delivery.

All three conversations emphasised the importance of local insight and genuine community collaboration in social policy.



A global conversation on connection-driven care

Our Chair Jarrod Wheatley and CEO Sophi Bruce were invited to lead the Better Care Network’s recent international webinar, *Supporting Children and Families to Flourish*. Joined by This Life Cambodia and Child in Family Focus Kenya, they explored deinstitutionalising care, the emerging role of therapeutic one-to-one caregivers, and the system-wide shifts needed to build a Child Connection System.

Links to the full webinar and resources are available at centreforrelationalcare.org.au/knowledge-hub

Youth work: Real relationships, real impact

CRC Chair Jarrod Wheatley spoke at the 2025 Youth Work Conference in November, highlighting the crucial role youth workers play in building trusted, steady relationships with young people.

Despite often preventing crises, youth work receives just 1% of the funding spent on crisis responses. Jarrod called for a shift to a Child Connection System, and shared his thoughts on how relational, community-based youth work offers a model for the wider child and family system - one centred on genuine human connection.



Out and about: Relational approaches in action

Over the past few months, we've had the chance to meet and visit some incredible people who are committed to putting relationships at the centre of their work. This included:

- **RuffTRACK** in Western Sydney - a tour of the farm to learn more about how they give disengaged teenagers skills, education and a sense of self-worth, and reconnect them with the community.
- **Stepping Stone House** which creates safe, stable homes for young people at risk of homelessness - a vital service given that one in three young people leaving out-of-home care experience homelessness in their first year.
- **Learning Ground** in Mt Druitt, including meeting with a young person who shared her story of how connection to the program had made a real difference.
- **AbSec's** last quarterly forum for the year, including an important yarn by Aunty Deb Swan, A/Prof BJ Newton and A/Prof Paul Gray about barriers to restoration.
- The October meeting of the **'Family is Culture' Advocacy Working Group**. The Group provides a strong, community-informed voice on Aboriginal child protection reform.
- The **Pyjama Foundation's** Angel of the Year event, celebrating the volunteers who visit children in out-of-home care each week to help with learning and life skills.
- **Creating Links** in Western Sydney - to hear about the work they do for children and families, and people with disability, including family support programs, financial counselling and culturally inclusive community services.
- **BackTrack's** annual Field Day in Armidale (photo below), which brought together services from across NSW and Queensland working in different ways but with a shared commitment to young people and relational, community-led approaches. Our CEO Sophi Bruce led a workshop exploring what makes each Tracker organisation's work unique, and where opportunities exist to enhance support for young people and collaborate across the network.
- We've continued to build momentum through connections with relationally-oriented organisations including **Confit Pathways**, **Bandu**, **UNSW Parent-Child Research Clinic**, **Thempra**, **Complexability** (Sensemaker), **Australian Association for Restorative Justice (AARJ)** and **Accountable Futures Collective**.
- We also love attending the **Relationships Project's** 'Time Together' initiative, which occurs each month and brings together like-minded people across the world.

We're so appreciative to everyone who shared their time, expertise and ideas with us.



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