Centre for Relational Care

# COMPLEX ADAPTIVE SYSTEMS

## THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT CHILD PROTECTION

2025

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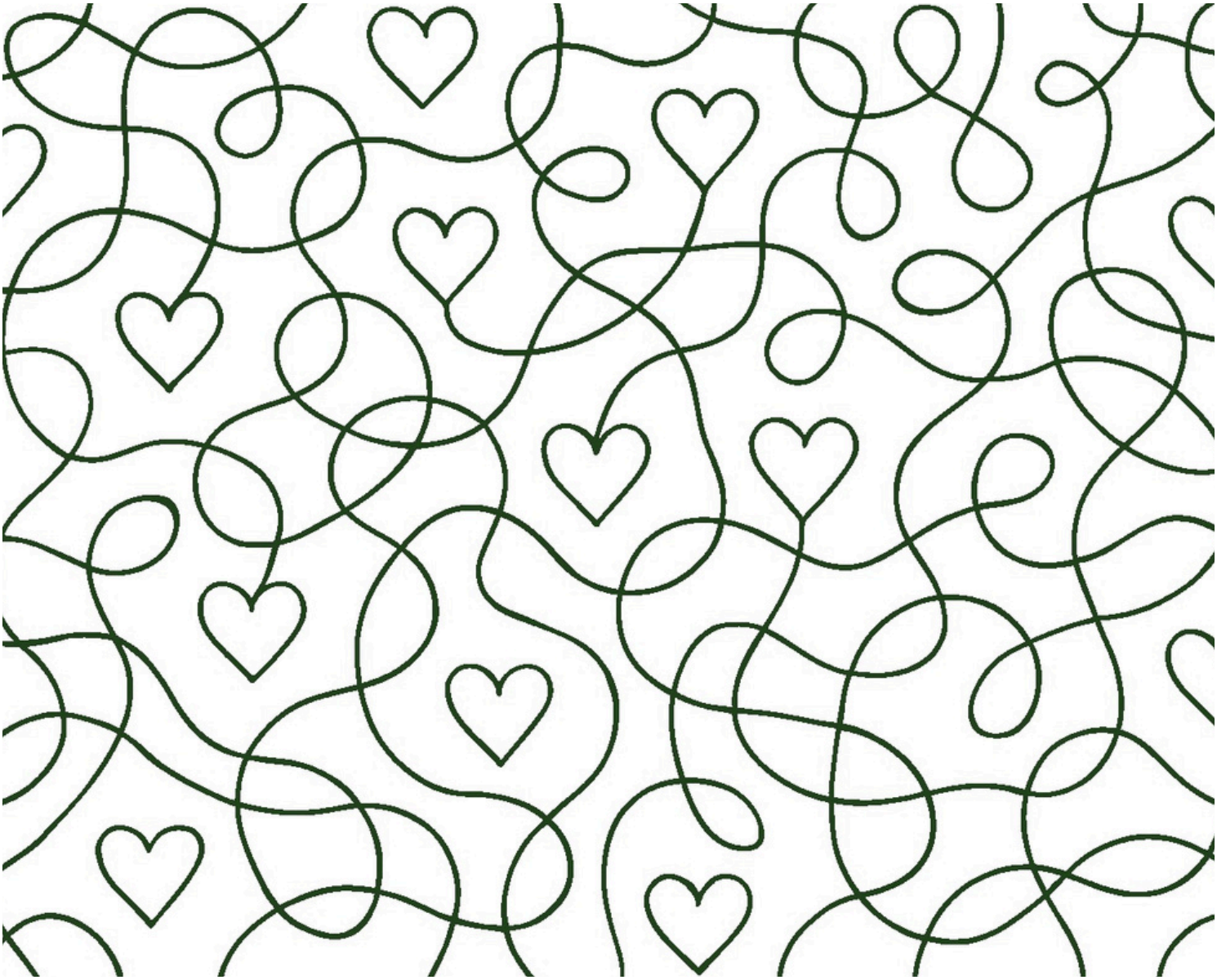


# INTRODUCTION

*Over two decades ago, I was fortunate to join a group of bright minds committed to creating social, systemic, and personal change. Together, we co-founded a 'Systems Thinking' think tank, with the guidance of Professor Jake Chapman, a renowned systems thinker in the UK.*

*We began working together to apply, practice and teach these new thinking approaches across different organisations and sectors. We would regularly reconvene to discuss our successes and failures in an ongoing cycle of application, reflection and adaption, and my appreciation of the significance of learning-by-doing really began to take shape.*

*During this time, Professor Chapman wrote the influential piece "System Failure: Why Governments Must Learn to Think Differently" (Chapman, 2004), critiquing traditional policy-making approaches and advocating for 'systems thinking' to address complex public service challenges. This piece influenced much of our think tank's innovative work together and has continued to inform each of our ongoing careers in making social and systemic impact. I am ever thankful for this peer mentorship and support.*

*Fast forward to today, where I find myself in a leadership seat at the Centre for Relational Care (CRC), working to transform a system that is failing children, young people and families. I recently revisited "System Failure" and am struck by how relevant the thinking is some 20 years later. I have adapted some of this original analysis to illustrate why child protection reform is so challenging, drawing on the work of the CRC and building on recent thinking from others who are advocating for fundamental change.*

*My thanks to Professor Chapman for his guidance on this thought piece.*

*Sophi Bruce, CEO Centre for Relational Care*

Child protection systems across Australia and comparable contexts are stuck in patterns that prioritise compliance, surveillance, and risk management. While often framed as safeguarding, these systems fracture the very relationships that help keep children safe. Meaningful reform requires more than new policies or restructures. It requires deeper, braver work; a fundamental rethinking of how we relate, respond and care.

Drawing on systems thinking, this thought piece explores why change is so difficult in complex adaptive systems like child protection and proposes an alternative pathway forward. Four interconnected ideas are offered to guide transformative reform:

- Families and communities are living systems. They strengthen when natural networks of care are valued and supported, not controlled.
- Organisations are self-maintaining systems. Shifting the values and culture of organisations within the wider system enables relational outcomes to take root.
- Systems are resilient and are able to resist change due to deep foundations: Paradigm change, especially from "protection" to "connection," is required to overcome harmful 'status quo' defaults.
- Feedback loops that value connection over compliance can help the system evolve toward relational safety and belonging. What we measure shapes how we care.

Building on existing thinking and practice, these ideas include practical strategies to realign purpose, redesign incentives, and reorient practice around connection, trust, humanity and community.

# THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT CHILD PROTECTION

## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO SYSTEMS THINKING

Systems thinking is an approach to addressing complex issues by intentionally shifting how we view them. At its core, it involves two major shifts:

1. Moving from a singular view to a pluralistic approach that actively seeks multiple perspectives from people in the system. This helps to understand the deeply held values and narratives.
2. Moving from a 'reductionist' approach that breaks problems into smaller parts, to a holistic approach that focuses on the relationships and dynamics between parts.

We tend to default to singular and reductionist thinking to help our overworked brains simplify challenges. It feels logical and efficient to attempt to break down big issues into smaller parts that can be separately examined and resolved by experts in each area. This can work well for straightforward, technical challenges for which there are clear outputs, specialised experts and established resource limits. When it comes to more complex, or messy challenges, a good systems thinker will understand that there is no clear solution that can be easily resolved yet will seek to make progress on the issue by surfacing, understanding and addressing the dynamics of the system.

## SHIFTS TO SYSTEMS THINKING

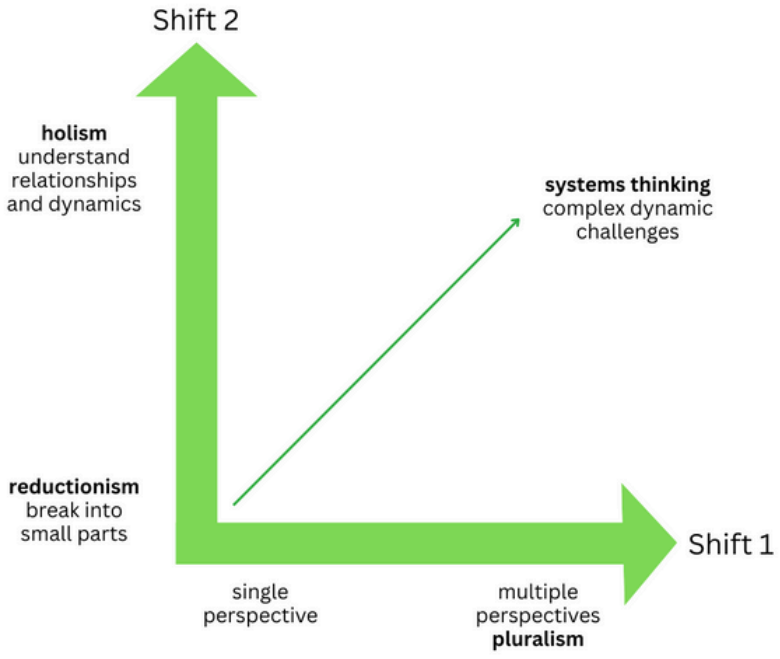
Systems thinking involves thinking about issues in an intentionally different way by:

- Asking different and deeper questions about the issue or problem for which there is no clear, or one, answer.
- Engaging with the multitude of perspectives that are involved in the ‘system’ of interest.
- Focusing more on relationships, processes and improvements, as opposed to data, goals and solutions.
- A greater appreciation of ‘side effects’, ‘emergent properties’ or ‘unintended consequences’ of decisions, and the need for flexibility and autonomy.

This list of characteristics makes it clear that systems thinking is not a quick fix that can ‘solve’ policy issues that have a long tradition of not working. Rather it is an approach that is likely to make policymakers and decision makers less certain by allowing for deeper questions and bringing difficult ground truths into discussions.

Shifting to a mode requiring humble inquiry and ‘not-knowing’ may not satisfy a mindset that wants to rescue, solve and control, but it will pave the way to tackling complex issues more appropriately.

### FIGURE 1: SHIFT IN SYSTEMS THINKING



## EXAMPLES

Shifting to a **pluralistic way of thinking** means surfacing and working with different perspectives. People or entities involved in ‘a system’ see its purpose, function and failures differently. These differences in perspectives can confuse conversations about what to do. In addition, any initiative based on one perspective will inevitably stir up misunderstandings and hostility from those who see things differently. Yet it is unlikely that real progress can be made until these differences are made visible.

An early example of a pluralistic approach to complex issues comes from the systems methodologist Peter Checkland and his work on improving the prison system (Checkland & Poulter, 2006). In this study, Checkland focused on understanding the "problem situation" by engaging with the multiple perspectives and viewpoints of the prison system. These were wide and varied, ranging from “protecting society,” “rehabilitation,” “a university of crime” and “an employer of choice.” This helped to provide insights into the system that would otherwise have not been seen.

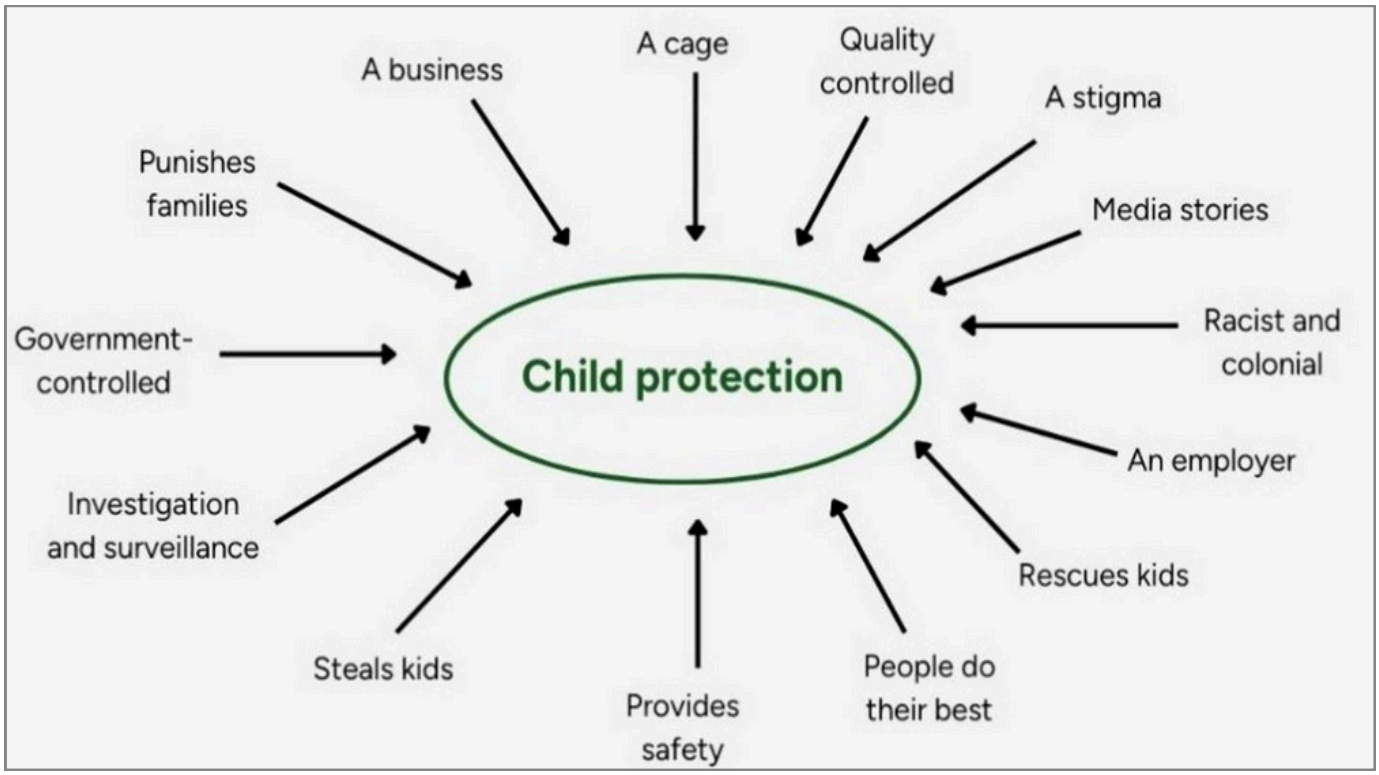
Applying a similar approach to the child protection system would uncover many different and important perspectives.

Using this lens of ‘pluralism’, Figure 2 represents views and experiences of child protection, drawn from conversations the CRC has had with people connected to the system.

This is just one interpretation of the multiple perspectives in play – there are many others, and it is important to keep surfacing them, with care and acknowledgement of the deep trauma and pain that exists for many people impacted. While each perspective adds to the complexity and messiness, holding them all as valid (even if we don’t agree with each) is our collective responsibility. This is the vital work of truth-telling and of uncovering the different concerns, objectives and values embedded within the system.

Embedding pluralism should be a deliberate and ongoing practice in systems change. This means creating structures and processes that actively seek out, listen to, and hold the diverse perspectives held by those connected to the system. Reform efforts must make intentional space for these voices not as a token gesture, but as a core part of understanding the system’s complexities and designing responses that are more just, effective, and human.

### FIGURE 2: PLURALISM EXAMPLE: DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES OF THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM



A shift to a **holistic way of thinking** helps to build understanding about why a particular issue occurs by looking at the relationships and feedback loops between the various factors in a system. One tool from systems thinking that can help with this is a causal loop diagram, which visually represents the dynamics in play.

The example below (Figure 3) uses this type of diagram to show how compliance-led targets (such as recording the number of 'visits', and plan deadline dates) are treated as indicators of 'good' performance in the child protection system.

These types of targets shape the system's dynamics by leading careworkers to prioritise paperwork over finding and supporting relationships. The feedback loops starkly illustrate a cycle where overreliance on compliance outputs is a misguided measure of improved performance. In practice, this focus works against what children and families most want and need - relationship and connection.

By zooming out and taking this holistic view of the issue, we can begin to explore how to intervene to change harmful dynamics.

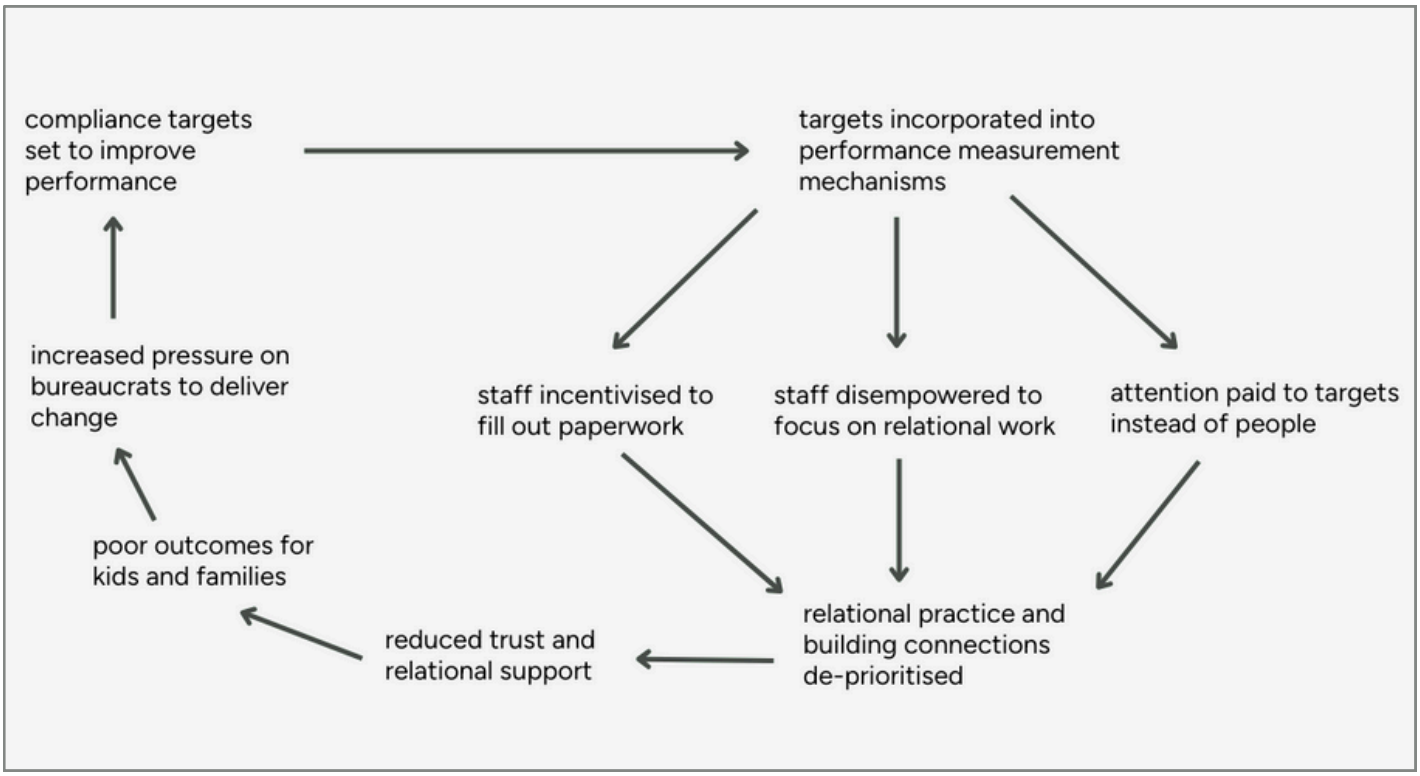
For example, if measurement is based on more meaningful indicators, such as asking children and families what matters to them during visits, or what support is most helpful, then connection with people becomes a stronger incentive than merely complying with administrative targets.

Holistic thinking encourages us to see beyond isolated problems or individual actions and instead consider the whole system - its patterns, relationships and interactions. It invites us to look at how different elements influence one another over time, rather than focusing narrowly on single events or targets.

In the context of child protection, this means recognising how policies, practices, measures, and relationships combine to shape outcomes for children and families. With holistic thinking we can better understand unintended consequences, identify leverage points for change, and design solutions that address root causes rather than symptoms.

To recap: **pluralism** (embracing multiple perspectives) and **holism** (understanding the system's relationships and dynamics as a whole) are two interconnected aspects of 'systems thinking' that underpin the work of engaging meaningfully with complex adaptive systems.

## FIGURE 3: HOLISM EXAMPLE: COMPLIANCE TARGETS IN THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM



# WHAT IS A COMPLEX ADAPTIVE SYSTEM?

A complex adaptive system is a network of interconnected components – such as individuals, organisations, or even entire ecosystems – that interact in ways that are often unpredictable. Think of our climate system, the economy, or even a busy emergency department. These systems consist of many individual parts following their own relatively simple rules, yet together they create behaviours more intricate than the sum of their parts.

The adaptability comes from the system's ability to adjust to changes in the environment through the interactions of its components. Over time, the system learns and self-organises, evolving in response to external pressures or internal feedback. This can make the system appear flexible and able to adapt to new circumstances.

However, this same adaptability also makes the system resistant to major change. The network of interactions in a complex adaptive system is often deeply entrenched in patterns that have developed over time. When an attempt is made to impose significant change, these established patterns resist disruption, as the system works to maintain its current state. It does this by self-correcting, rebalancing, or finding new ways to absorb the change without fundamentally altering the system's structure. As a result, even well-intentioned interventions can have unexpected, unintended consequences because the system may adapt in ways that were not anticipated.

The value in understanding complex adaptive systems is that it explains why so many planned projects and interventions go awry when we try to implement them.

The child protection system as an example of a complex adaptive system, comprises thousands of agents – including caseworkers, families, courts, regulators and service providers – creating a web of complex interactions. While individual agents follow relatively simple rules and processes, the sheer number of interactions creates complexity, rendering any linear interpretations of causes and effects unfeasible. A decision by one caseworker can trigger responses across multiple agencies, affecting countless others in ways that weren't necessarily intended or predicted. For instance, a decision to remove a child will impact them and their immediate family, but also extended family relationships, school enrolment, healthcare provision and community support networks.

A complex adaptive system can evolve and adjust over time yet the very processes that allow for this flexibility also contribute to its resistance to large-scale change. This makes it difficult to implement reforms or major shifts without the system recalibrating in unexpected ways.

Here are four ideas from systems thinking to help us understand why the child protection system, as a complex adaptive system, is so challenging to change. The ideas draw on different interconnected levels: families and communities as living systems, organisations as self-maintaining systems, and the broader child protection system as a resilient whole that maintains stability through foundational paradigms and feedback loops.

These ideas invite a way of thinking about system dynamics and, through this reframe, offer practical ways to progress meaningful change.

# IDEA 1 FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES ARE NATURAL LIVING SYSTEMS

### UNDERSTANDING NATURAL LIVING SYSTEMS

The main way to understand the characteristics and properties of complex adaptive systems is by observing how natural or living systems, such as families and communities, operate through dynamic, interdependent relationships. To engage with these systems effectively, we must move beyond traditional, mechanical approaches to control and prediction.

Paul Plsek, a systems engineer, illustrates the difference between mechanical and living systems by comparing throwing a stone with throwing a live bird (Plsek, 2001). Mechanical principles of motion and forces can help us to determine where a stone will land. However, when throwing a bird, its trajectory is quite unpredictable even though the bird's motion is governed by the same laws of mechanics.

We might make the bird's path calculable by binding its wings and adding weight, to create predictability comparable to the stone, but this cruelly eliminates the bird's essential capabilities in the meantime. This mirrors how rigid, control- oriented policy approaches can undermine the essential relational and adaptive capacities of family systems.

### WHY CONTROL APPROACHES ARE LIMITED

In child protection, this means we cannot predict or control family outcomes through rigid and non-relational procedures. When we treat families like machines, applying inputs and expecting predictable outputs, we often find that outcomes are not what we expected. When this occurs, the tendency is to add more control mechanisms, more oversight, more rigid procedures. However, this mechanical approach fails to recognise that tamilies and communities have their own internal wisdom for maintaining balance, adapting to challenges, and protecting their members.

### WORKING WITH LIVING SYSTEM PROPERTIES

Plsek suggests a more effective strategy of placing food at the destination as a way to direct the bird to a specific location. Influence remains possible but, rather than imposing control, it is generally more productive to develop strategies or incentives that take account of the behaviour and properties of the system involved.

This approach requires creating conditions that naturally encourage safety and wellbeing, and designing for natural support patterns like family-led decision-making, kinship care, and community networks. Sharing learning, celebrating innovation, and aligning funding with relational patterns can support meaningful change.

### PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

Systems change requires working with the natural dynamics of families and communities as 'living systems' with the 'knowledge, relationships and resources to care for their children' (Cocks, Spence & Ryan, 2024).

Box 1 outlines strategies for this, that include mapping and strengthening natural support networks by identifying existing family, cultural, and community support structures and using strengths-based prompts to design for what's already working. Making space to discuss what works and celebrate innovation develops simple ways for families and frontline supporters to share feedback safely and highlight successful relational outcomes. Building flexible funding models that follow the strongest connections and are aligned to long term relational outcomes means investing in networks and organisations that already effectively support children and families through strong relationships.

**BOX 1: 'LIVING SYSTEMS' – PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE**

### FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES ARE NATURAL 'LIVING SYSTEMS'

**Families and communities are like living organisms. Instead of trying to predict and control outcomes that restrict natural dynamics, encourage and incentivise more organic ways to safety and wellbeing that strengthen and enable what already exists in family connections and communities.**

- **Recognise how families, peer supporters and communities naturally protect children** – such as through family-led decision making - and build on these as existing system strengths. Amplify natural helping relationships, such as kinship care and neighbourhood/community support.
- **Create feedback loops that reinforce positive changes** by sharing learnings about relational practice through networks and celebrating innovation.
- **Design relationship-based funding where money follows natural support patterns.** Identify where positive relational outcomes are already happening and build funding models that follow the strongest connections. In particular, invest in networks and organisations that already effectively support children and families.

# IDEA 2 ORGANISATIONS ARE SELF-MAINTAINING SYSTEMS

## UNDERSTANDING AUTOPOIESIS IN HUMAN-ACTIVITY SYSTEMS

Human-activity systems, including child protection, share characteristics with complex adaptive systems. A key similarity is the ability to survive significant environmental changes through adjustments in behaviour and internal processes. But what exactly is it that is maintained during this adaptation?

The concept of autopoiesis, introduced by Maturana and Varela (1980), offers a way to understand this. They originally developed the idea in the context of a living cell, which maintains its structure and function by continuously producing the components that make it up. Autopoiesis describes how all living systems have a self-organising and self-maintaining nature, structured through a network of interdependent processes. In such systems, each component contributes to the production or transformation of other components, allowing the whole network to continuously recreate and sustain itself, even in the face of change.

## HOW ORGANISATIONAL IDENTITY PERSISTS THROUGH CHANGE

In child protection, this manifests in how organisations within the system have cultures, procedures and relationships that perpetuate themselves, even as individual staff members come and go. New caseworkers quickly learn "how things are done here," absorbing not just formal procedures but also unwritten rules and cultural norms that maintain the system's identity. For example, even when new policies emphasise family preservation, caseworkers may continue to practice removal-oriented approaches because that's what the system reinforces through supervision, case reviews and organisational culture.

Autopoiesis is a useful metaphor for how government systems reproduce themselves over time. Institutions and organisations possess inherent mechanisms that enable them to withstand major shifts in their operating environment.

Even during significant contextual changes where an institution may need to radically adjust its size, structure or resource flows, it will typically maintain its fundamental identity. What persists through these adaptations is a distinctive internal make-up of core values and culture, as demonstrated through the behaviours and actions of the people working there.

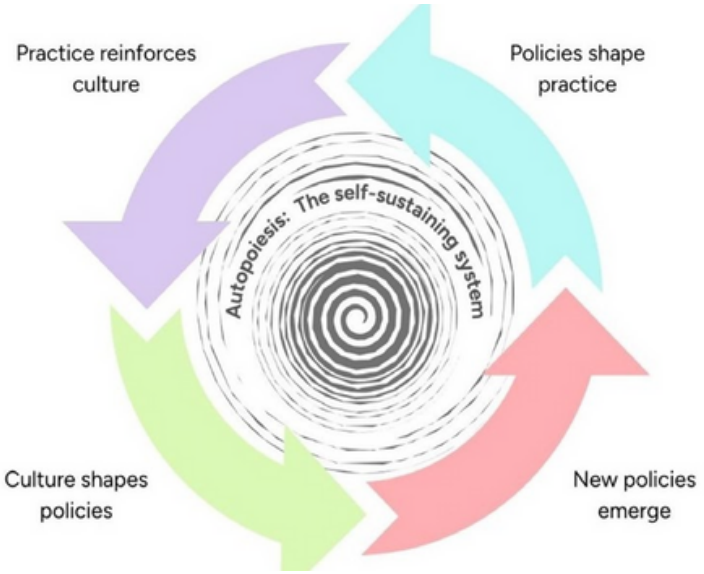



FIGURE 4: AUTOPOIESIS: THE SELF-SUSTAINING SYSTEM

## PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

Changing the fundamental makeup of an autopoietic child protection organisation can be like altering a living cell's genetic code – it requires more than surface-level adjustments and calls for intentional transformation of the underlying values, relationships and cultural norms that sustain the system's identity.

Systems change strategies for transforming self-maintaining systems within child protection are outlined in Box 2. They involve naming and challenging core assumptions through dialogue and reflective practice, and bringing people together around a shared purpose focused on trust and connection, with input from those with lived experiences.

Culture change requires collaborating better with families and rewarding relational outcomes that strengthen children's connections with caring adults. By aligning policies, incentives and resources with these practices, change becomes more sustainable. Transformation is challenging and often slow, yet shifting entrenched behaviours enables the system to evolve in ways that better serve children, families and communities.

BOX 2: 'SELF-MAINTAINING SYSTEMS' – PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

### ORGANISATIONS ARE SELF-MAINTAINING SYSTEMS

**Autopoiesis helps describe how human activity systems continually regenerate themselves through their internal patterns of processes, norms and values. Intentionally altering the patterns makes way for relational values and practices to emerge, transforming the organisation's self-reinforcing dynamics in ways that sustain connection and trust.**

- **Reveal underlying assumptions and values that reproduce culture.** Highlight dominant language and narratives around risk, family capability and safety and how these are formally (e.g. through reports, supervision) and informally (through storytelling, conversations) perpetuated in the current system.
- **Align to a shift in purpose.** Create a new vision for child protection that moves from risk management to relationship building, and from compliance to connection. This vision becomes the guiding light for strategy, programs and activities.
- **Invest in system cultural change alongside structural reform**. Upskill and empower child protection workers to make decisions based on the relational needs of children and families. Celebrate and reward relational outcomes, such as an increase in the quality and quantity of a child's connections with caring adults.

# IDEA 3 RESILIENT SYSTEMS HAVE DEEP FOUNDATIONS

## UNDERSTANDING SYSTEM RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE

Another characteristic of a complex adaptive system is its ability to adapt, recover and evolve in response to change or disturbances – or its resilience. In human-activity systems like public services or government agencies, we have seen how the concept of autopoiesis helps build understanding of how these systems regenerate. If autopoiesis explains how a system maintains and reproduces itself, resilience explains how it withstands pressure and disruption. The longer the system has existed and been required to adapt to change over time without fundamentally changing itself, the greater its resilience is likely to be.

Complex systems grow from specific conditions and carry their history with them. This helps us to understand why a complex adaptive system like child protection is so resistant to fundamental change. Its resilience stems from its foundations: its origin, the seen and unseen values that underpin it, and its core purpose. A helpful metaphor is a house built on enduring foundations. While the structure above ground may be remodelled or even entirely rebuilt, the original foundation continues to define the building's footprint and its relationship to the surroundings. It might look different aesthetically but there's a core identity that persists.

## HOW HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS SHAPE CURRENT PRACTICE

The metaphor above is a way to explain why child protection, as a complex adaptive system, has proven so resistant to fundamental change. Its deep foundations and origins of removal, cultural and social constructs, assumptions, and a core 'protection' purpose keep it anchored in place. Despite decades of inquiries, restructures and reform agendas, there hasn't been a radical change to the child protection system. Its enduring stability reveals the depths of its resilience.

Resilience shows up in the child protection system's approach to risk mitigation and child safety, shaping every aspect of its operation. Even as policies and procedures change, the system continues to process information, allocate resources, and make decisions in ways consistent with its historical emphasis on risk.

One consequence of this is defensive practice - for example where documentation and compliance are prioritised over time spent building relationships with children and families. Resilience helps sustain the fundamental logic of risk aversion, even when reform efforts aim to reorient the system toward care or relational safety.

The resilience of the child protection system is rooted in a harmful paradigm deeply shaped by colonial history, including the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and generations of intergenerational trauma. These historical foundations continue to influence how the system interacts with First Nation communities today, often perpetuating cycles of intervention and separation despite stated commitments to reconciliation and self-determination. The child protection system's 'rituals of reform' (Libesman & Gray, 2023) might create a perception of change and accountability on a surface level but do not fundamentally alter harmful structures and practices.

## THE NECESSITY OF PARADIGM SHIFTS

Changing complex adaptive systems requires more than rebuilding, or restructuring, or reforming. As Pirsig (1974) observes: "The true system, the real system, is our present construction of systematic thought itself, rationality itself, and if a factory is torn down but the rationality which produced it is left standing, then that rationality will simply produce another factory. If a revolution destroys a systematic government, but the systematic patterns of thought that produced that government are left intact, then those patterns will repeat themselves in the succeeding government. There's so much talk about the system. And so little understanding."

Paradigms are the shared social agreements, beliefs, and assumptions that structure thinking and shape how we see and make sense of the world. Paradigms are the foundations – they are the deep source code behind systems that informs the mental models, policies, and practices that follow. In the context of systems thinking, paradigms shape how we interpret information, make decisions, and interact with the world around us. A paradigm shift refers to a fundamental change in the way a system, community or society perceives and understands the world. It transforms underlying assumptions, beliefs, and mental models that guide how a system operates.

Donella Meadows identifies "changing the paradigm" as one of the most powerful leverage points for intervening in the foundations of systems. In her hierarchy of intervention points, paradigm shifts rank near the top because they fundamentally transform how we understand and interact with a system (Meadows, 1999). While paradigms are difficult to change because they're deeply embedded in culture and identity, they can collapse suddenly when enough anomalies accumulate that cannot be explained within the existing framework, creating space for entirely new ways of seeing and being in the world.

## PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

In systems thinking, paradigms powerfully influence what change is possible, and how. Resilience is often thought of in terms of the system's capacity to withstand change, but it can also refer to the system's ability to evolve when its old ways of functioning fall out of step with new realities. When the existing paradigm no longer fits the context, system resilience requires more than stability; it requires complete transformation.

Box 3 outlines systems change strategies that support a paradigm shift, starting with truth-telling, self- determination, and community-led support, particularly in challenging and addressing the harmful assumptions and power imbalances that continue to impact First Nations communities. A paradigm shift from 'protection' to 'connection' makes way for new foundational values, beliefs and agreements to harness positive system resilience around relationships, equity and healing, which is what children most need (Wheatley, 2023).

Prioritising early support, family and cultural connection, and shared decision-making reflects a values-based, relational approach that nurtures humanity and long-term wellbeing, making the existing status quo increasingly unpalatable.

### BOX 3: 'RESILIENT SYSTEMS' – PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

#### RESILIENT SYSTEMS HAVE DEEP FOUNDATIONS

**Complex systems like children protection carry their history with them and are resistant to fundamental change because of deeply embedded foundations.**

**True transformation requires more than changes to surface-level structures, policies, or procedures. It involves confronting deeply held narratives and supporting the capacity of the new paradigm to adapt and 'reproduce itself'.**

- **Back truth telling and rights to self-determination.** Develop deep awareness to directly confront the system's failings through truth telling and listening to stories from people with lived experience. Acknowledge the harm caused to families and children, particularly to First Nations people. Address foundational power imbalance by restructuring decision-making authority to First Nations-led leadership and governance.
- **Articulate the paradigm shift.** Transform the systems narrative from 'child protection' to 'child connection'. Replace the unrealistic assumptions of the current paradigm with new stories and metaphors that guide towards relational outcomes. Reward strong child connection practice in the system through incentives, recognition, celebration and funding/resource support.
- **Support an alternative relational paradigm.** Build on the resilience of connection by prioritising families, early intervention and community support. Ask children and families what they need and how they experience the system. Develop meaningful measures to help the alternative paradigm adapt and evolve.

# IDEA 4 SYSTEMS MAINTAIN STABILITY THROUGH FEEDBACK LOOPS

## UNDERSTANDING HOMEOSTASIS IN SOCIAL SYSTEMS

Homeostasis is the ability of complex adaptive systems to maintain stability through interconnected feedback loops to preserve balance within an optimal 'steady state' range - the target condition the system tries to maintain. Just as our biological systems regulate body temperature using sensors that detect deviations and trigger corrective responses, social systems also use sensing mechanisms to maintain steady state stability through feedback loops.

In child protection, the optimal steady state has been defined as "children are protected." The system employs sensing mechanisms such as mandatory reporting and investigations to detect and respond to deviations from this steady state, with interventions like child removal acting as corrective responses.

However, an important distinction exists: unlike biological homeostasis, which has evolved over millions of years, the child protection system's steady state is artificially imposed. The steady state of "children are protected" means the system must be responsive enough to react to danger but nuanced enough to avoid unnecessary intervention. In practice, this is largely unachievable and leads to an overwhelmed system that undermines the very protection it aims to provide.

In biological homeostasis, feedback loops maintain functional equilibrium. For a child protection system that's trying to maintain an unrealistic steady state, efforts to self-regulate and correct can make things worse. By the time responses occur, situations have typically deteriorated further, with the trauma of intervention frequently exceeding the original risk. Perhaps then, the fundamental challenge for child protection, using homeostasis to guide thinking, is its unachievable steady state.

## THE CHALLENGE OF THE 'PROTECTION' STEADY STATE

When the system detects a child at risk, it responds by removing the child or intensively monitoring the family. However, these interventions often destabilise families, increase trauma, and weaken support networks.

This creates new vulnerabilities that trigger more reports and system involvement, escalating into a cycle where the response generates the very problems it is trying to solve:

- **Delayed responses due to high caseloads and bureaucratic processes**
  Examples: High caseloads mean workers can't respond as quickly as needed or sometimes don't respond at all; cases pile up while waiting for court dates; families wait months for support services; and backlogs in assessments delay critical interventions.

- **Overreaction problems, where risk-averse decisions lead to unnecessary interventions**
  Examples: Removing children from families because of socio-economic disadvantage; cultural practices are misinterpreted as risk factors; and over-reporting of minor concerns prompt system involvement that destabilises functioning families.

- **Resource limitations that constrain the system's ability to respond effectively**
  Examples: A shortage of foster care placements leads to inappropriate care arrangements; limited preventive services force crisis-only responses; and a high staff turnover disrupts continuity and relationship-building.

### RECALIBRATING TO CONNECTION

What could it look like if the steady state is redefined to "children are connected", where protection is enhanced through safe and secure relationships with family, community, culture, carers and supportive networks?

This recalibration would establish different feedback mechanisms and thresholds, such as measuring relationship quality and the strength of network support. When the system detects that a child needs stronger connections, it responds by strengthening family bonds, community ties, and support networks. Enhanced relationships provide better protection, early problem-solving, and resilience. Stronger networks detect concerns earlier and respond more effectively, preventing crises from developing. With fewer crises to manage, the system can invest more in relationship-building, creating even stronger protective webs.

Even when removal is necessary, a "connection" steady state ensures the child maintains safe, secure relationships in their new environment – whether with foster carers, kinship carers, or residential care workers. This creates positive feedback loops where a stable placement with strong relationships supports a child to heal, thrive and maintain connection to family, culture and community.

### PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

A reset of the steady state acknowledges that sustainable child protection emerges from robust networks of caring relationships rather than system surveillance. Transforming the child protection system where the relational benefits to children can be maintained through positive feedback loops requires a shift from a compliance-driven model of protection to one rooted in connection, trust, and relational stability, as outlined in Box 4.

A period of adjustment where the system recalibrates from "child protection" to "child connection" would need to be supported by deliberate efforts and learning cycles as the system adapts to its new ways of maintaining this adjusted equilibrium. Phased implementation allows the system to adapt towards this new purpose. By amplifying positive feedback loops, where successful relational approaches lead to better outcomes and further reinforce good practice, the system can build momentum for sustainable change, guided by ongoing feedback from those it serves.

**BOX 4: 'STABLE SYSTEMS' – PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE**

### SYSTEMS MAINTAIN STABILITY THROUGH FEEDBACK LOOPS

**Homeostasis is about how systems maintain stability by keeping key variables within defined limits.**

**Opportunities here are to create positive feedback loops by shifting from mere "protection" to a more holistic concept of connection that includes relationships, family, connection, community support, and cultural identity.**

- **A new shared vision of "protection" that incentivises the system towards connection.** Shift away from a 'steady state' that's based on compliance and regulation (protection) towards one that is more aligned to the natural system dynamics of relationship and stability (connection).
- **Manage the tension/discomfort between transformation and maintaining essential functions.** Support and spotlight relational care provision during service transition and provide clear communication, support and positive reinforcement.
- **Phase implementation to allow for system adaptation.** Build on small wins and amplify the positive feedback loops that emerge from the reorientation to connection. Learn by doing and adjust care provision based on feedback from children, families, carers, workforce and community.

# CONCLUSION

## MOVING SYSTEMS CHANGE FORWARD

What does this mean for actual systems change and the CRC's endeavours to shift the current child protection system to a child connection system, where a child's relationships are prioritised as pathways to safety, security and wellbeing?

The table below offers a summary of the ideas and practical actions presented in this piece.

| SYSTEM IDEA | INSIGHT | PRACTICAL ACTIONS |
|---|---|---|
| **Families and communities are living systems** | Strengthening natural networks of care opens up more relational pathways for children to experience deeper connection, belonging, and everyday safety. | • Map and support existing family and community relationships.<br>• Invest in relationally strong local supports.<br>• Fund what's already working. |
| **Organisations are self-maintaining systems** (Autopoiesis) | Organisational cultures shape frontline practice. Shifting the organisation's purpose and values towards connection helps the system to self-maintain around relational outcomes for children. | • Shift internal narratives and language.<br>• Reorient organisational purpose toward trust and connection.<br>• Incentivise connection with relationship-based outcomes. |
| **Resilient systems have deep foundations** | Systems resist change until we shift the foundations. Challenging the harmful status quo of the current paradigm can support a shift to a relational paradigm that better serves children, families and communities. | • Amplify truth-telling and the voice of lived experience.<br>• Back First Nations-led leadership and decision-making.<br>• Build a system around a purpose of "connection" not "protection" and align culture, policy and funding. |
| **Systems maintain stability through feedback loops** (Homeostasis) | If the system measures and rewards compliance, that is what it reproduces; if it values connection, then new feedback loops can emerge and positively reinforce relational outcomes. | • Redefine the system as a 'child connection system'.<br>• Build and strengthen feedback loops that support children's experiences of safety, love and stability. |

There is wide agreement that child protection reform is needed, but it will not be achieved through another restructure, another review, or another wave of accountability metrics. This is a moment for deeper, braver work - a transformation that challenges how we think, relate and respond.

Right now, the system is trying to protect children by controlling risk, but in doing so it often fractures relationships and erodes the very connections that keep children safe. We can reimagine the system not as a mechanism for controlling risk, but as a living network that cultivates connection and unlocks natural human capital. As systems thinking shows us, if we don't act on this shift at a fundamental level then the current status quo system will keep self-correcting back to the same harmful defaults. We'll keep seeing over-surveillance and relational deprivation, and we'll continue to fail vulnerable children and families.

Moving forward with system change means practically tackling the system at different levels. These are not linear steps, but interdependent actions that together support the emergence of an alternative system based on connection. On a systems-level, the ideas presented in this piece ask policymakers and practitioners to:

### UNDERSTAND THE CURRENT SYSTEM

- Identify the feedback loops that reinforce risk-averse decision-making and incentivise activities that put bureaucracy over humanity.
- Make visible the underlying logics and ground truths: who benefits from the status quo, and how.
- Support truth-telling: surface and acknowledge diverse perspectives and lived realities.
- Let the voice of lived experience guide deeper understanding and awareness.

### CHANGE HOW THE SYSTEM BEHAVES

- Embed First Nations leadership and governance across government, policy and practice.
- Build shared trust and authority between professionals and families in decision-making.
- Redesign assessments and contracting to centre relational, cultural, and connection-based strengths.
- Create reflective communities of practice where workers can learn from eachother and support relational practice.
- Make way for people with lived experience to guide and design what works.

### SHIFT WHAT DRIVES THE SYSTEM

- Reframe the system's purpose from managing risk to nurturing connection, trust and relational safety.
- Redirect funding and accountability to First Nations-led, family-led, and community-led practice that already strengthen relationships.
- Prioritise and incentivise connection-based measures over compliance-based metrics.
- Redirect resources from investigation to prevention and support.

### SUPPORT AN ALTERNATIVE SYSTEM TO EVOLVE

- Set realistic timelines (years, not months) for transformation, shifting to evaluative. methodologies that measure what matters.
- Invest in 'learn by doing' approaches with built-in feedback from lived experience and flexibility to adapt.
- Celebrate "bright spots" of relational practice where people and communities are doing things differently with positive feedback loops.
- Support the relational health of practitioners, organisations, and systems as they shift to relationship and connection-focused care.

Some of this work is already underway, yet true transformation calls for a whole-of-system orientation towards connection. One that reframes success from 'compliance' to 'relationships', that moves decision making to attuned adults closest to the child, that listens to and measures what matters to those most impacted, and that unlocks the system's potential to heal and support.

It's time for a Child Connection System - and the movement is growing. The transformation ahead is neither linear nor predictable; it requires patience, humility, and using holistic and pluralistic thinking on making progress together in complex and human realities. As we're seeing through the relationships and partnerships that are building across CRC's networks, there is energy, appetite and determination for making these deep systems changes possible.

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