



*Translating trauma-informed  
knowledge to practice:  
Family Time for children in out-of-  
home care in NSW*

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We acknowledge the tradition of custodianship and law of the Country on which the University of Sydney campuses stand. We pay our respects to those who have cared and continue to care for Country.

*Tree of Knowledge* - pokerwork on kangaroo skin, Lynette Riley, 2010

<http://Sydney.edu.au/kinship-module>



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# Overview

- Fostering Lifelong Connections study
- Watch previous Lunch and Learn sessions:
  - Fostering Cultural Connections for Aboriginal children (October 2021)
  - Collaborative action research on Family Time practices (November 2020)
- Research about trauma-informed family time practice
- Co-design and disseminate practice-ready resources
- Action research to improve practice
- Co-regulation practice cycle

## Fostering Lifelong Connections study: Aims and research questions



Created by Aunty Lorraine Brown and Aunty Narelle Thomas from Coomaditchie Aboriginal Corporation with FLC action researchers, October 2020

The University of Sydney

**Develop, test, embed, and disseminate relationship-building practices** to encourage sustainable, positive relationships between children's carers and families (across long-term foster care, Kinship care, guardianship or open adoption)

***How can caseworkers support children's birth and carer families to develop and sustain positive relationships?***

***What makes Family Time work well for children and their birth and carer families?***

# Collaboration with experts by experience and profession

## Research Team

Chief investigators: Professor Amy Conley Wright, Professor Judith Cashmore AO, A/Professor Lynette Riley, Dr Susan Collings

Research Centre for Children & Families: Sarah Ciftci, Dr Betty Luu, Megan Mitchell, Suzanne Pope

Partner investigators: Professor Elsbeth Neil (University of East Anglia) & Professor Peter Pecora (University of Washington & Casey Family Programs), Matthew Jones (NSW DCJ) and Robert Urqhart (Barnardos Australia)

## Partner Organisations

- NSW Department of Communities and Justice
- Barnardos Australia,
- CareSouth,
- Catholic Care Hunter-Manning,
- Catholic Care Wollongong,
- Key Assets,
- Uniting, Wesley Dalmar

22 Caseworkers and 11 Casework Managers from partner organisations are the study's action researchers.

4 study sites: Dubbo, Newcastle/Maitland, Sydney, Wollongong

## Expert Reference Group

### Experts-by-Experience Young people, parents, carers

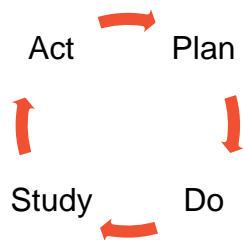
Bobby Hendry, Miimi Morris, Malcolm Sky, Jacqui Kaelle, Billy Black and Tegan Whittaker, Chantelle Rozzi

### Experts-by-Profession

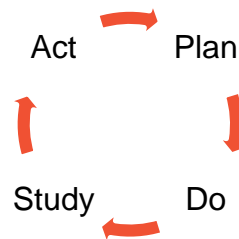
Mariaelena Albu, Professor Judy Atkinson, Sue Buratti, Sue Foley, Steve Kinmond, Associate Professor Loyola McLean, Rowena Medland, Bernadette Wood, Ananda Hall

# Fostering Lifelong Connection- 3 action cycles

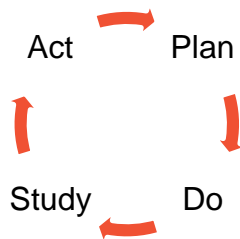
Learning session 1-  
Initiation  
*Feb 2020*



Learning session 2-  
Refinement  
*Oct 2020*



Learning session 3-  
Sustainability  
*June 2021*



Learning session 4-  
Dissemination  
*March 2022*

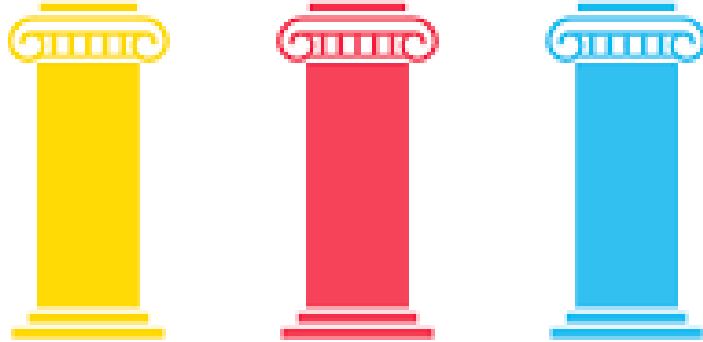
**Scaling up in Partner  
Organisations and  
resource development for  
the sector  
*April 2022***

# Practice trials

Practice descriptions	Trial
<b>Debriefing</b> - Meet or talk to child, parent and/or carer before and/or after visit about what worked well and what to improve.	Cycle 1, Wollongong & Sydney
<b>Facilitate Family Time at a distance</b> - Assist children and families to use technology-based communication (e.g., video or calls/group chats) or no-tech exchanges of letters, artwork, photos	Cycle 1, Maitland & Dubbo
<b>Carer coaching</b> - Maintain regular contact with carers before/after visits to offer feedback on their efforts and encourage reflection to improve future interactions with the child's parents or other relatives.	Cycle 2, Wollongong
<b>Co-regulation</b> - Assist birth relatives and carers to reflect on and understand their own emotions so they can respond sensitively to children's reactions and manage behaviour that arises before/after visits.	Cycle 2, Sydney & Maitland
<b>Cultural connections</b> – Document practices that support children connecting to their culture through their relationships and time spent with family.	Cycle 2, Dubbo
<b>Hearing children's voices</b> - Work with carers to collect children's immediate feedback after visits and discuss with carers and birth relatives	Cycle 3, Sydney & Wollongong
<b>Supporting sibling connections-</b> Ask children about their siblings and whom they would like to see, implement creative ways to keep children connected	Cycle 3, Dubbo & Maitland

# Three underlying and overlapping principles

1. **Trauma awareness**
2. **Cultural safety and respect**
3. **Reflective practice**





## 1. Research to understand trauma-informed practice with family time

**Article published in** *The British Journal of Social Work*

**Trauma-informed Family Contact Practice for Children in Out-of-home Care**

Susan Collings, Amy Conley Wright, Loyola McLean, Sue Buratti

bcab147, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab147>

**Published:** 01 August 2021

## Evidence on trauma-informed practice

- Refers to practices to rebuild safety, resilience and positive change in individuals
- Reorient workplace culture towards healing, recovery and client empowerment
- Staff training equip workers to recognise and respond to trauma symptoms and increase awareness of secondary (or vicarious) trauma
- Secondary trauma can result in compassion fatigue, worker burnout, high staff turnover - all make it harder to forge warm relationships with children & families
- Staff training can reduce the incidence of secondary traumatic stress by ensuring self-care strategies and group processes such as supervision are in place
- Australia lacks consistent practices for responding to trauma and focuses on specialist clinical interventions to address children's trauma symptoms

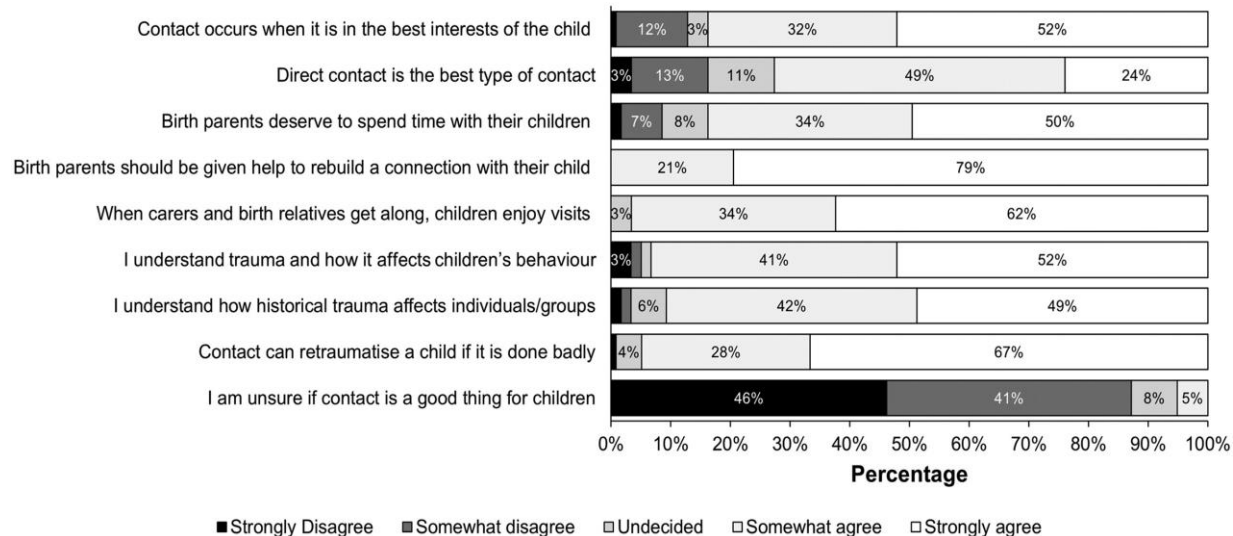
## Trauma and family time practices

- Child welfare a trauma ‘saturated’ sector- all children in out of home care have experienced trauma and many parents and carers, too
- Trauma can lead to behaviours that undermine healing relationships and placement stability
- Family Time can be a site of trauma reactivation
- Emphasis on benefits of direct contact and concern with physical safety rather than psychological and emotional wellbeing
- Agency processes and negative attitudes by caseworkers and carers can undermine birth parents healing and reconnecting with their children
- Caseworkers and agencies need trauma knowledge and skills to support relational safety for children in out-of-home care
- Sector lacks clear and consistent practice guidance for how to support children’s relational safety before, during and after Family time

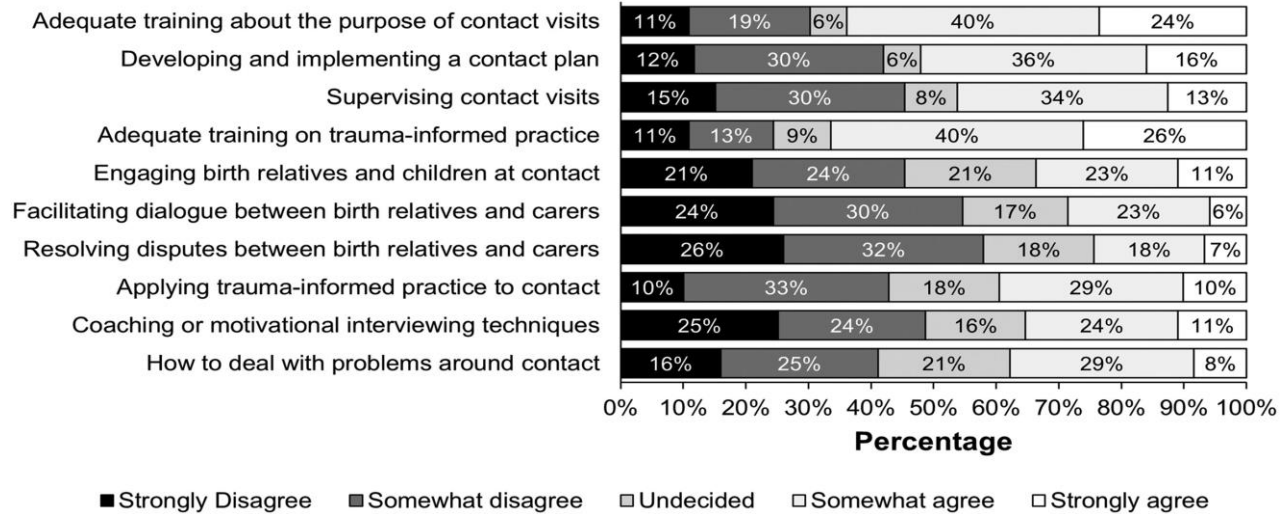
## Research overview

- Mixed method study between March and August 2020
- Baseline data on caseworker confidence, knowledge, skills, and practices in NSW
- Learn what out-of-home care organisations are doing to build trauma-informed practice
- Surface gaps and priorities for practice change
  
- Convenience sampling of caseworkers and senior leaders in DCJ and NGO sector
  
- Caseworkers completed an anonymous survey (n = 118)
  
- Senior leaders took part in semi-structured interview (n = 15) on Zoom
  
- Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were completed.

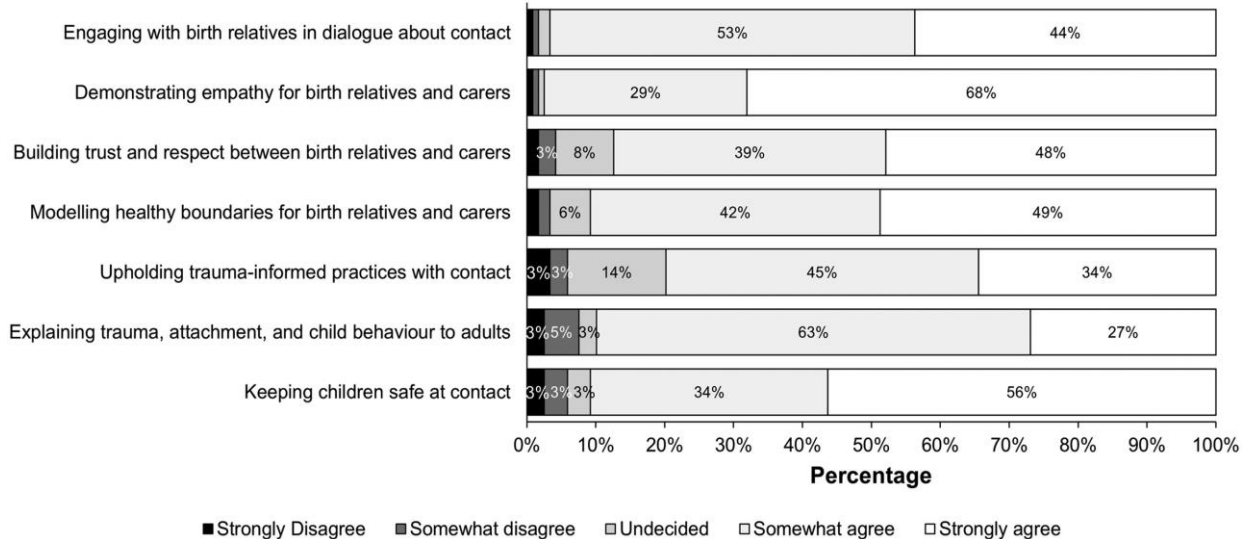
## Figure 1 Caseworker beliefs about contact and trauma effects.



**Figure 2 Caseworker perspectives on adequacy of training.**



**Figure 3** Caseworker confidence in applying trauma informed approach to contact.



# Overall findings

- Caseworkers confident in their knowledge of trauma and ability to protect child safety at contact but not to explain trauma impacts to carers or manage conflict between carers and birth relatives.
- Confusion about how to deliver trauma-informed practice hampered knowledge-to-practice translation.
- Staff training and supervision used to build workforce skills but not evaluated and no strategies to reduce vicarious trauma identified.
- Strategies to promote psychological safety and improve cultural safety for Aboriginal children and families were in their infancy.
- A community of practice will aid efforts to share promising strategies for improving relational safety at family time
- Adults and children should lead process for improving family time practice



## 2. Co-design and disseminate practice resources

Small, achievable solutions to agreed problem-  
Family Time - using co-design with experts from  
research, practice and personal experience



## Co-design tip sheets

An example of the collective voice of the experts

Importance of peer connection and reflective practice to better understand the day-to-day challenges

Sector wide lens on the key themes that were recognised and responded to by the production of the tip sheets so that the information could be shared with Professionals, Carers and Parents

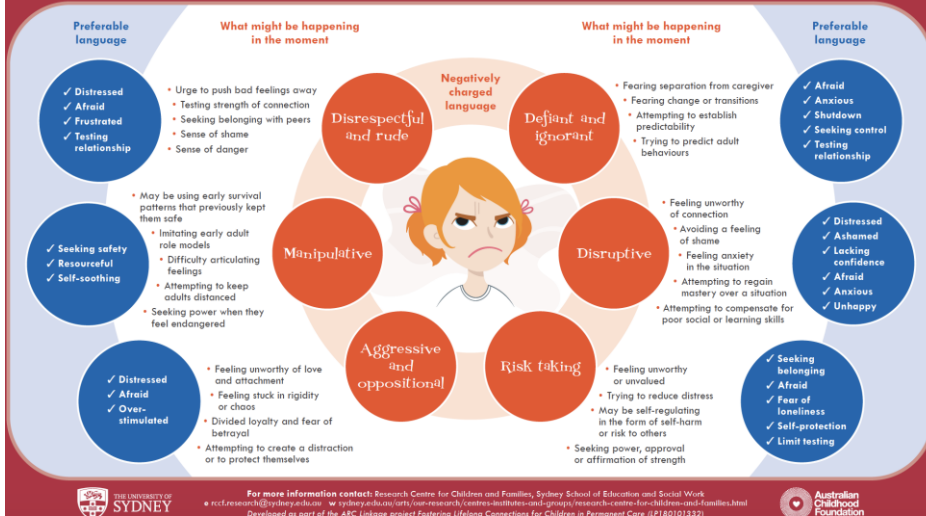
Cross sector capacity building and dissemination of information via NGO, DCJ and Aboriginal Partners

# Words Matter: Trauma sensitive language with children

**Trauma**  
is expressed through behaviours not language  
can mask fear or shame

**Stress responses**  
are known as 'fight', 'flight', 'freeze' and 'fawn'  
can resemble anti-social behaviours

**Negative language**  
blames children for their trauma  
is internalised by children and leads to negative labels



## Co-design with Experts and informed by action cycles

### Taking the journey toward a trauma-informed approach to Family Time

**Key messages for moving toward trauma-informed practice**

**Stable and therapeutic relationships** are the starting point for trauma healing. Family Time offers children and families a chance to heal and enjoy healthy relationships when they get the support they need.

**Help children regain a sense of control** by allowing them to make choices about Family Time such as when and how it happens, who drives them and what music plays in the car, whether they talk and what about.

**Casework practices that promote safety for Family Time**

**Foster collaboration** with adults from both families by bringing the focus back to their shared connection and love for the child rather than differences between them.

**Stay in touch with families between visits.** A check-in phone call before Family Time can show you care and debriefing after can help families reflect on what went well and plan for next time.

**Give adults the tools to co-regulate with the child.** Carers and relatives can model a calm state and help children regain a safe connection to their body using play and body-based activities during Family Time.

**Be aware of verbal and non-verbal communication.** When language and gestures are perceived as interrogative it mobilises fear and shame. Keep a neutral tone of voice, use non-judging words and maintain relaxed and welcoming body language to open a dialogue.

**Lead difficult conversations with children's families** to adjust Family Time plans to better suit the child's needs. Model calm, respectful communication that encourages open discussion of other options.

**Make time for reflection after each visit.** Ask yourself if you can do more to build on the child and family strengths and what needs to happen to improve future Family Time experiences.

**Family Time plans should be as unique and dynamic as the child.** Take into account their interests, culture, age and developmental stage (which may not match expectations for their chronological age).

**Child wellbeing is the core aim of Family Time.** Keep in mind that the purpose is to give children a chance to thrive in relationships, not to schedule an obligatory event.

**Physical spaces affect emotional safety.** Create inviting spaces for safe relationships to flourish whenever visits occur. How children travel to and from visits affects their experience of Family Time. Minimise any changes to time or driver at short notice.

# Nourishing the first spark of connection

Remember that there is enough love to go around

Children thrive when they are surrounded by people who love them. When parents know what is happening for their child, they can support them and the adults around them to make the most of Family Time.

**Your child may be trying to:**

- Adjust to changed routines
- Understand where they belong
- Avoid upsetting you
- Sustain friendships
- Stay in touch with family
- Express difficult emotions
- Work out what they want from Family Time

**What they may be feeling:**

Fear, Sadness, Guilt, Anxiety, Shame, Confusion

**What you might be feeling:**

Anxiety, Grief, Shame, Guilt, Anger, Sadness

**Parents can help by:**

- Telling them you are proud of them
- Reassuring them that you are okay
- Celebrating the positives with them
- Avoiding promises you can't keep
- Being consistent
- Asking what they want to do
- Involving their carers
- Focusing on making time together enjoyable
- Sharing photos, drawings and letters
- Giving honest, age-appropriate answers to questions
- Bringing a toy or something they can take home



For more information contact: Research Centre for Children and Families, Sydney School of Education and Social Work  
 e: [rc4cf@sydney.edu.au](mailto:rc4cf@sydney.edu.au) w: [sydney.edu.au/education-research/centres/children-and-family-research-centre-for-children-and-family-time](http://sydney.edu.au/education-research/centres/children-and-family-research-centre-for-children-and-family-time)  
 This resource has been developed with support from the Department of Education and Communities, Queensland  
 Developed as part of the ABC Linkage project: *Protecting Life-long Connections for Children in Permanent Care* (LP120101332)

For more ideas and resources for parents, go to: [www.parentline.nsw.gov.au/](https://www.parentline.nsw.gov.au/)



## Co-design with two mothers and in consultation with Expert Reference Group members

# Strengthening all the sparks of connection

How parents can support the adults who care for their child and improve Family Time

There are things parents can do to show support for their child and strengthen important connections at Family Time.

**Your child's carer may be:**

- Balancing care needs of multiple children
- Lacking information about your child's history
- Struggling to know your child
- Following agency rules
- Lacking certainty about how long your child will stay with them

**What they may be feeling:**

Uncertain, Stressed, Helpless, Overwhelmed, Protective

**Parents can help by:**

- Suggesting a meeting with carer and caseworker
- Showing you want to help your child settle in
- Being open about your goals and feelings
- Listening to their goals and feelings
- Suggesting that you know a communication book
- Sending letters/photos to update them and your child

**Your child's caseworker may be:**

- Balancing the needs of multiple families
- Following policies and procedures
- Experiencing burnout and stress
- Continuing to develop skills and knowledge
- Facing time or resource pressures
- Coping with staffing shortages

**What they may be feeling:**

Frustrated that they can't make things better, Pressured by the agency, Blamed by families for past decisions

**Parents can help by:**

- Suggesting how to support you and your child
- Allowing them time to respond to your queries
- Keeping records of agreements
- Being open about your concerns
- Giving details of your culture, values, beliefs
- Updating them on changes to your situation
- Asking for advance notice of caseworker changes



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 e: [rc4cf@sydney.edu.au](mailto:rc4cf@sydney.edu.au) w: [sydney.edu.au/education-research/centres/children-and-family-research-centre-for-children-and-family-time](http://sydney.edu.au/education-research/centres/children-and-family-research-centre-for-children-and-family-time)  
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## Co-design with two mothers and in consultation with Expert Reference Group members

## Shining your own light on Family Time

Check in with your feelings as Family Time approaches and after it ends

**Ask yourself:**

- What helps me feel grounded?
- What makes me feel out of control?
- What helps me show my child they are loved?
- What do others notice when I am doing well?
- What can I do to make the visit good?
- What if I am not feeling okay?



**Things to remember:**

- Quality is more important than quantity when it comes to time together.
- Do something nice for yourself or arrange to speak to someone after a visit to prevent a downward spiral.
- Have some strategies in mind for when you are finding things hard.

**Know your limits and your triggers**

- Notice and accept the feelings that come up
- Have some games and activities up your sleeve
- Pack some healthy snacks

**Ask to have a phone or video visit instead this time**

- Talk to people involved in Family Time about your feelings so they don't misunderstand why you were not there

**Things to remember:**

- Give as much notice as possible if you need to cancel a visit and suggest an alternative so your child knows you want to see them.
- If you continue to struggle with visits, get professional help to unpack the issues and work out a way to get visits back on track.
- The hard moments will pass.

## Shining your own light on Family Time

Remember to care for yourself so you can care for your child



**Ask for help**

- To give you space
- To support your choices
- To talk about what is going on for you
- To understand your feelings
- To process changes
- To exchange photos with your child
- To write letters to your child

**Create an action plan**

- Start with small steps
- Make a vision board
- List what you need to get on track
- Seek support to make your plans a reality

**Self-Awareness**

- Do a mindfulness colouring-in book to ground yourself
- Sit somewhere quiet and focus on regular breaths
- Start tracking your moods
- Connect to your special place

**Notice and celebrate successes**

- Count the small things – even if it's getting out of bed!
- Track each thing you have done to reach your goal
- Keep records of courses, community sessions or workshops you have attended

**Self-care and healing**

- Take time out just for you
- Relax with friends
- Power your body with good food
- Keep a journal of how you feel
- Listen to music that brings you joy
- Be active – you can even dance inside the house!
- Take a walk in nature
- Get crafty – make something to give your child

**Make small goals**

- For your personal growth
- For your time with children and family members
- For making Family Time more positive
- For reigniting important connections
- For initiating changes to legal orders



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# Co-design with Experts and informed by action cycles

## Carers as Custodians of Children's Connections

Safe and meaningful connections with birth family

**The custodian role includes:**

- Understanding who the child's family is and nurturing those relationships
- Speaking warmly and respectfully about family members
- Understanding that these relationships are important
- Finding out what the child thinks and feels about family time and helping them to communicate their preferences

**The custodian role includes:**

- Honouring and celebrating these relationships including displaying photos
- Sharing special photos and stories about the child with family members that the child would like to share
- Committing to a routine for keeping siblings in touch that matches their changing needs
- Keeping the lines of communication open so that as the child gets older, they have the option to pursue these relationships for themselves

When children are in out-of-home care, maintaining relationships with children's family members can be complex and challenging but it's important not to give up and disconnect. Children who are disconnected from family members can feel grief, rejection, curiosity and a yearning to know more about them. Without efforts to mend relationships, the distress of disconnection can become intergenerational. Meaningful family relationships can help children heal from emotional trauma and develop a strong sense of who they are.

Carers are the custodians of children's connections to their family members when they are in out-of-home care. Carers need to hold these connections so they can be passed on to the child and they can carry those relationships with them over their lifespan.

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 Developed as part of the ABC Linkage project Funding Linking Connections for Children in Permanent Care (2018/011732)

## Linking lives for siblings living separately in out-of-home care

A practical tool for caseworkers to promote sibling connections

According to the Social Convoy Model, individuals travel through life within a network of relationships that offer social support. These are relationships that accompany the child over their life cycle.

The concept of "linked lives" highlights that individuals' life-course trajectories do not evolve in isolation, but are linked to others through their relationships, obligations and exchanges with important others such as parents and siblings. These links, once lost, are difficult to reconnect later in life, increasing the risk of isolation and loneliness.

If we think of children's relationships as a convoy, it captures how their relationships are both protective and dynamic in nature. Having a strong social convoy helps people of all ages cope with major life transitions and is linked to improvements in overall wellbeing over the lifespan.

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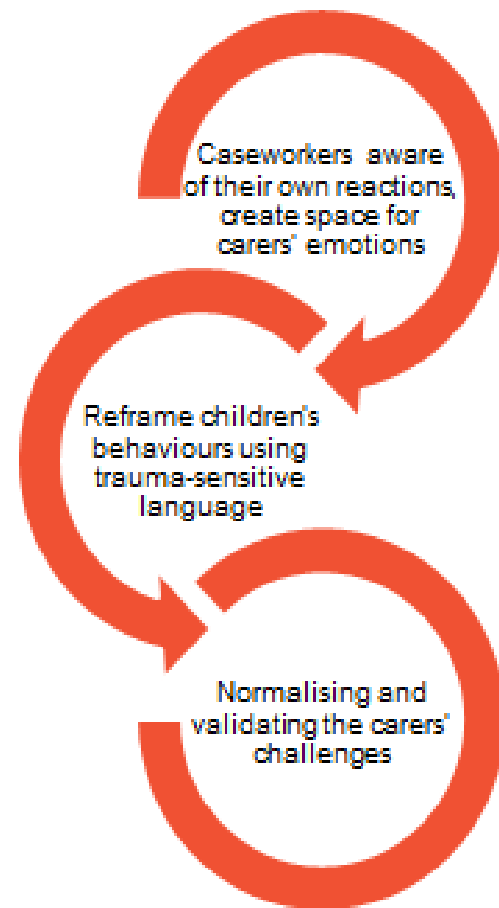
## **2. Action research to improve trauma-informed practice**

## Co-regulation

Create a holding environment for the carer so that they can provide that for the child



## Parallel process





# TECA

Trauma Expression &  
Connection Assessment



## Relational Assessments

- **Including a narrative where the child's trauma history can be incorporated into explanations and planning.**
- **Focus on relational safety and state dependance**
- **Co regulation and dyadic repair**



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