



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

—
Research Centre
for Children and
Families



Fostering Lifelong Connections

Presented by:

**Dr Susan Collings, Chief Investigator
Dr Sarah Ciftci, Project Coordinator**

Funded by the Australian Research Council LP180101332



Tree of Knowledge
pokerwork on kangaroo skin
Lynette Riley, 2010

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.

Overview

- **Overview of the Fostering Lifelong Connections project and practices trialled**
- **Practice resources for positive relationships between children's families**
- **Visit our legacy website**

ARC Linkage - Fostering Lifelong Connections for Children in Permanent Care



Partner organisations

NSW DCJ, Barnardos Australia, CareSouth, Catholic Care Hunter/Manning, Catholic Care Wollongong, Key Assets, Uniting, Wesley Dalmar

Research team

Chief investigators: Associate Professor Amy Conley Wright, Professor Judith Cashmore AO, Associate Professor Lynette Riley, Dr Susan Collings, Dr Sarah Ciftci, Dr Betty Luu, 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 Dr Robert Urqhart (Barnardos Australia)

Expert Reference Group

Experts-by-Experience and Experts-by-Profession

Project aim



Painting by Coomaditchie artists created with the FLC action researchers

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

Action research with caseworkers over 2 years.

Centering the principles of trauma awareness, cultural safety and respect & reflective practice.

Practice trials

Practice descriptions	Trial
Debriefing - 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
Facilitate Family Time at a distance - 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
Carer coaching - 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
Co-regulation - 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
Cultural connections – Document practices that support children connecting to their culture through their relationships and time spent with family.	Cycle 2, Dubbo
Hearing children's voices - Work with carers to collect children's immediate feedback after visits and discuss with carers and birth relatives	Cycle 3, Maitland & Dubbo
Supporting sibling connections - Ask children about their siblings and whom they would like to see, implement creative ways to keep children connected	Cycle 3, Sydney & Wollongong



Module 1

Supporting Co-regulation



Module 2

Carer Coaching



Module 3

Hearing Children's Voices about Family Time



Module 4

Supporting Parents and Family Members with Family Time



Module 5

Facilitating Family Time at a Distance



Module 6

Supporting Cultural Connections



Module 7

Supporting Sibling Connections

Online Learning Modules

- 7 online modules have been developed based on the practices trialled in the study
- Each module includes a short presentation with key learnings, case studies, reflective questions and practice resources that can be utilised to support the practice

Practice Resources




Module 2: Coaching carers to develop relationships with child's family

- **Coaching is a practice approach that can be applied to work collaboratively towards a range of goals, including relationship-building.**
- **Carers, in particular, may need support to achieve goals relating to building long lasting connections with parents and a child's extended family and to work through any relationship challenges.**

Practice Learnings

Help carer understand parent's story; encourage empathy, non-judgement "Keeping a positive slant"	Carer can help the child develop a better understanding of parents, with sensitivity and respect for them
Recognise what's impacting them – i.e., mental health, disability	Carer can understand context and not take issues (e.g., reliability) personally
Process frustration and come up with alternatives if visits are cancelled last minute	Carer can model flexibility with child, explain reasons and deal with feelings of rejection
Bring back to the child's experiences	Carer can recognise and maximise the good things for the child
Delve into assumptions and whether these are based on past and may have changed	Carers can move beyond dynamics in the past and be receptive to change; can be a particular issue with kin carers
Encourage attention to positive interactions during visits	Carer can observe what is going well and adjust their standards and expectations



Celebrate little wins

Listen and validate

Challenge dominant stories

This stuff takes time

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



Carers are the custodians of children's connections to their family members when they are in out-of-home care.

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 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.

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



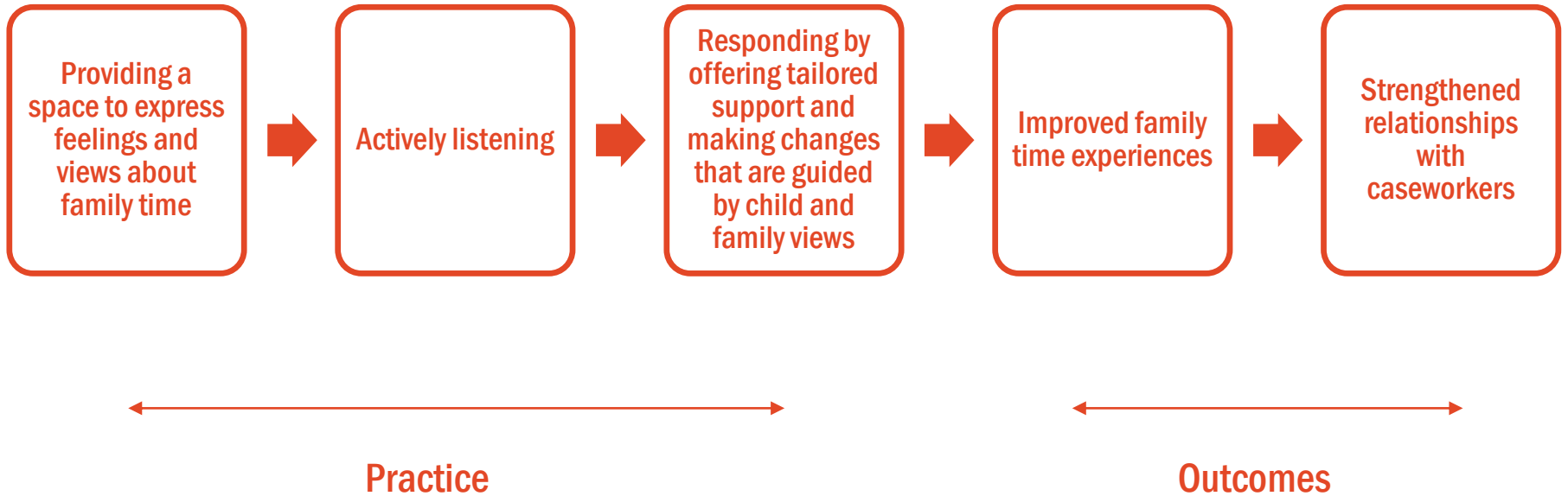
Keeping the lines of communication open so that as the child gets older, they have the option to pursue these relationships for themselves



Module 4: Supporting parents and family members through debriefing

- It's important to provide children's parents and family members with opportunities to have their say about family time.
 - This can help ensure family time is a positive experience for all involved.
- Caseworkers can check in with parents and family members prior to Family Time by asking open-ended questions such as: *How are you going? What's been happening? Has anything come up that might affect your next Family Time visit?*
- Caseworkers can also check in afterwards by asking: *What happened that made you feel good/not so good? What could I have done to help? What could you try next time?*

Practice Learnings



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

Light in the Dark

Bringing your feelings into the light so you can learn to heal

Emotional pain is like carrying a heavy weight. You may want the weight to be lifted or fear it will be with you forever. Feeling like this for a long time stresses the body. Understanding the early warning signs of stress allows you to take charge of your life.

Small things can trigger big reactions

- You get stressed over lost keys or running late
- You have trouble sleeping

You are in the emotional 'early warning' zone

- You may say and do things you regret
- You may have conflict with other people

Things related to your child will trigger big reactions

- Family time is cancelled at short notice or goes badly
- You feel grief and pain rising to the surface

You are entering the emotional 'amber' zone

- You may feel distress, panic or numbing
- People may think you are being unreasonable

You are feeling calm and positive

- You can cope with everyday upsets

You are in the emotional 'green' zone

- You enjoy today and feel optimistic about tomorrow

Calm state

Depleted energy

Stress build-up

Ready to explode

Things that reignite your pain can be overwhelming

- It might be Mother's/Father's Day or your child's birthday
- You feel the weight of anger, shame and fear return

You have entered the emotional 'red zone'

- Your reactions become unpredictable
- Your actions may frighten you and other people



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

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



Fear



Sadness



Guilt



Anxiety

What they may be feeling:



Shame



Confusion



Sadness



Fear



Anxiety



Grief



Shame



Guilt



Anger



Sadness

What you might be feeling:



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



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

Shining your own light on Family Time

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



Visit our website

<https://rccf-fostering-connections.sydney.edu.au/>

Fostering Lifelong Connections

Supporting children's connections to family and culture when they are in out-of-home care

Developed in collaboration with researchers, experts and practitioners in New South Wales, Australia and internationally

Connect With Us

Research Centre for Children and Families
Sydney School of Education and Social Work
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Website www.rccf-fostering-connections.sydney.edu.au

Email rccf.research@sydney.edu.au



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

—
**Research Centre
for Children and
Families**

