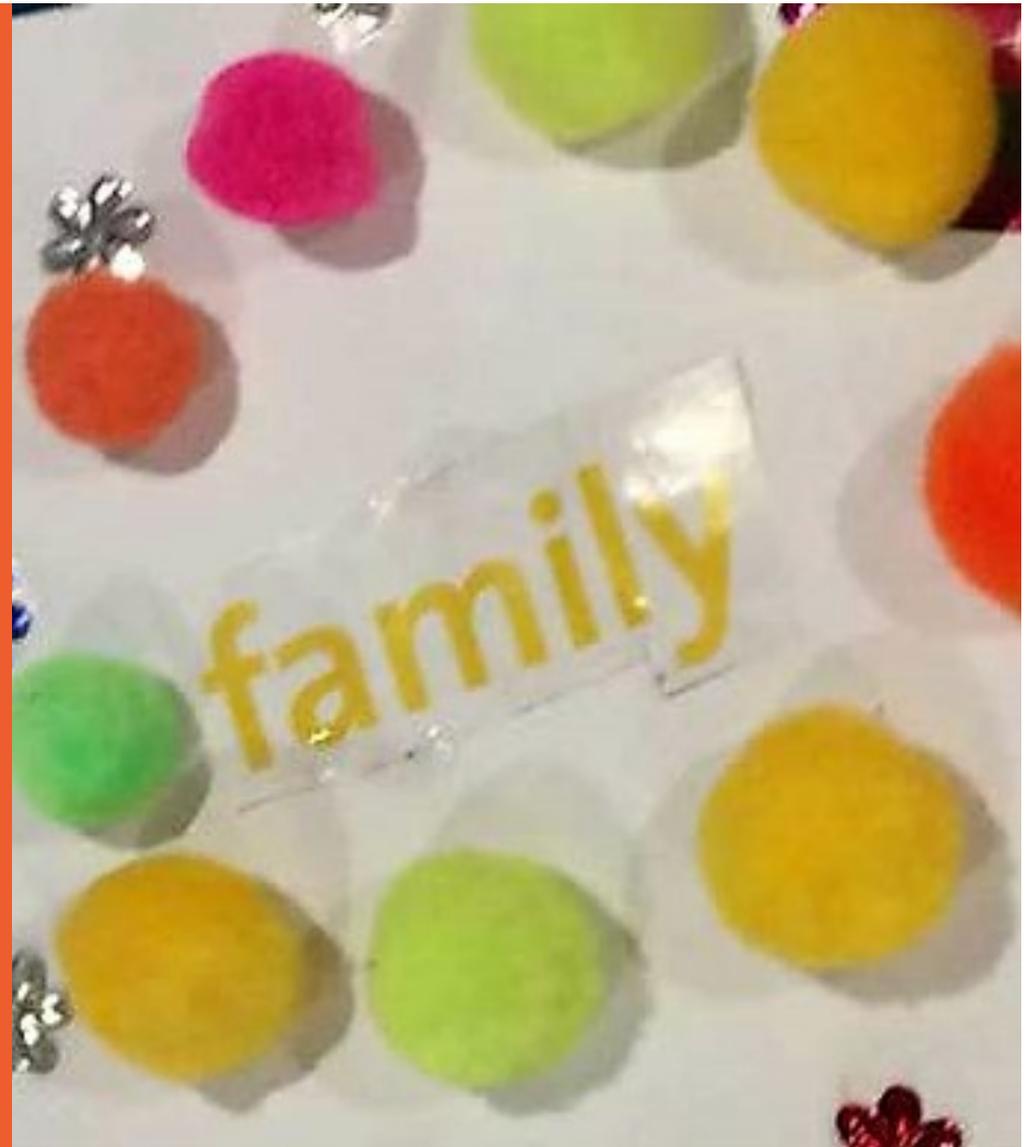


Learning from children and families about practices to support birth family connections in permanent care

Child Aware Conference
Brisbane, 17-18th May 2019

Presented by

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Background to the study

Out-of-home-care reforms emphasise the importance of contact for permanency.

Contact can help children build lifelong birth family connections and assist parents and children adjust to permanent removal.

Families are likely to benefit from professional support to establish or repair relationships (but)

Agency practices can get in the way of relationship building

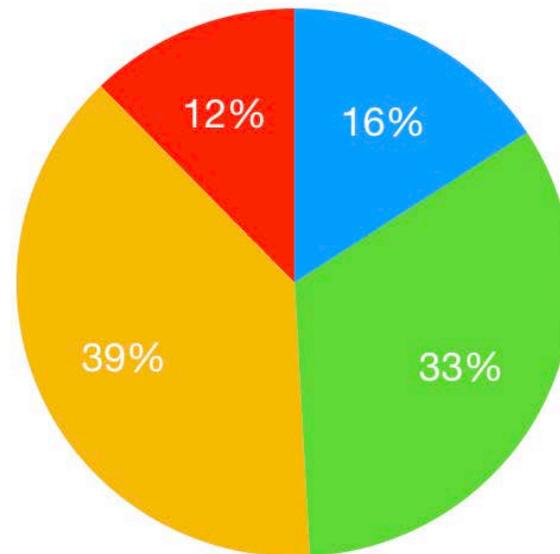
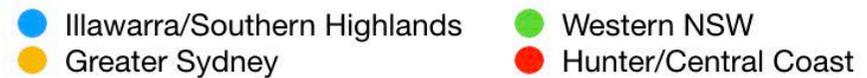
Need to understand what families (adults & children) need and want from agencies and build practice responses that match this

Recruitment

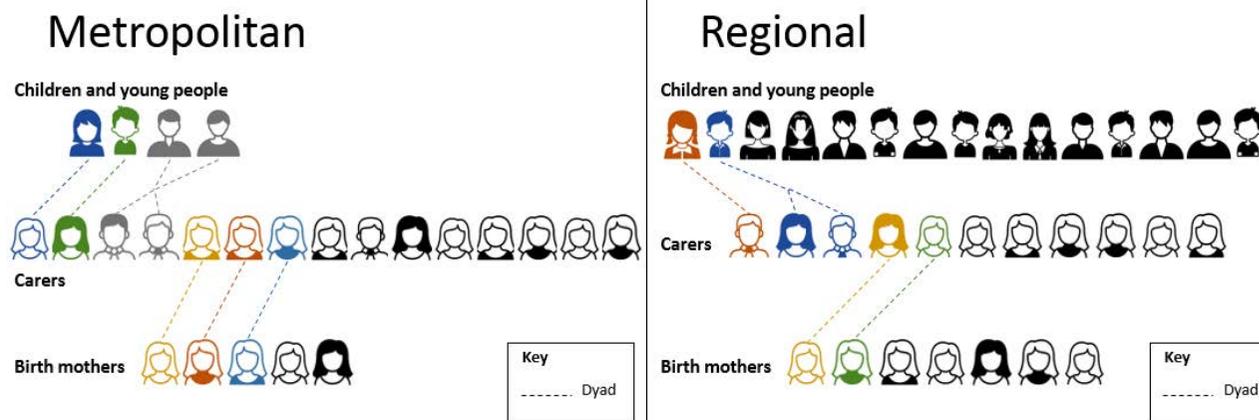
Convenience method:

- Direct approach via agencies & social media
March-August 2018

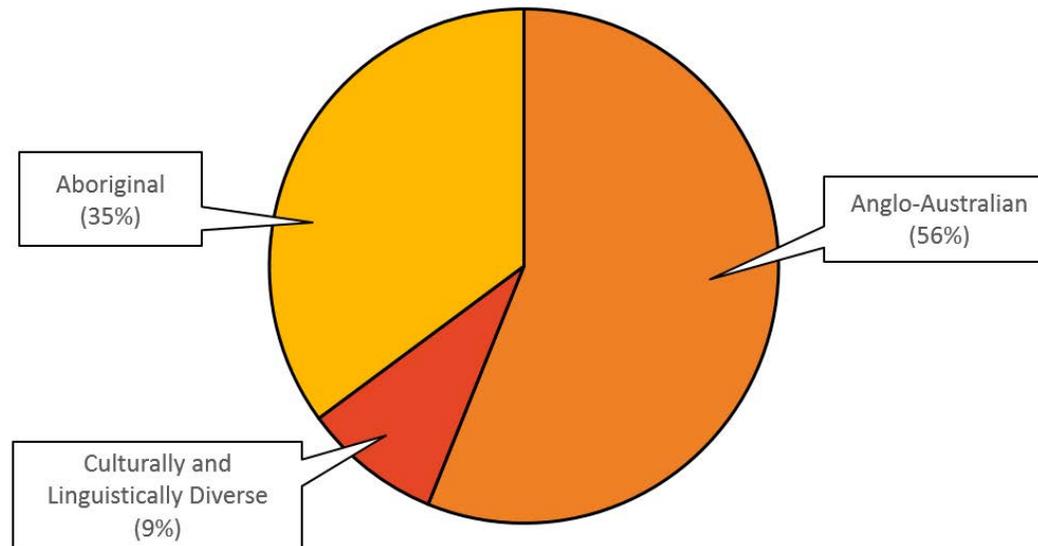
21 NGOs & 4 FACS districts; 6 community organisations; past research participants



Sample composition



Participant cultural background



Placement and contact types

Participant Group*	Guardian-ship	Open Adoption	Pre-adoption/g'ship	Foster care	Kinship care
Birth parents	3	0	6	9	8
Carer/adoptive parent	2	8	10	9	11
Child	-	3	3	10	3

Placement	Supervised	Unsupervised	Both*	None* *	Total
Guardianship		3		-	3
Open adoption		4		6	10
Pre-adoption/g'ship	4	8		-	12
Kinship care	10	6	3	-	19
Long-term Foster care	14	3	2	5	24
Total	28	24	5	11	68

*Differs for different family members **Parent is deceased or incarcerated, contact broken down

Themes about relationships around contact

Category	Sub-theme	Theme
The past (barriers)	The elephant in the room Repeating the cycle Attachment and trauma Unresolved parent issues	The shadow of the past
The past (enablers)	Worker support Making a connection Mutual validation Open communication Warmth and compassion	Getting to know each other
The present (barriers)	Disputed parent identity Fractured family ties Safety precautions or risks Parent-child interactions Agency buffer	Stumbling blocks
The present (enablers)	Clear boundaries Positive connections Predictability Special time	Making family time
The future (synthesis)	A normal family Accepting parent identity Dual connection No crystal ball	A shared future

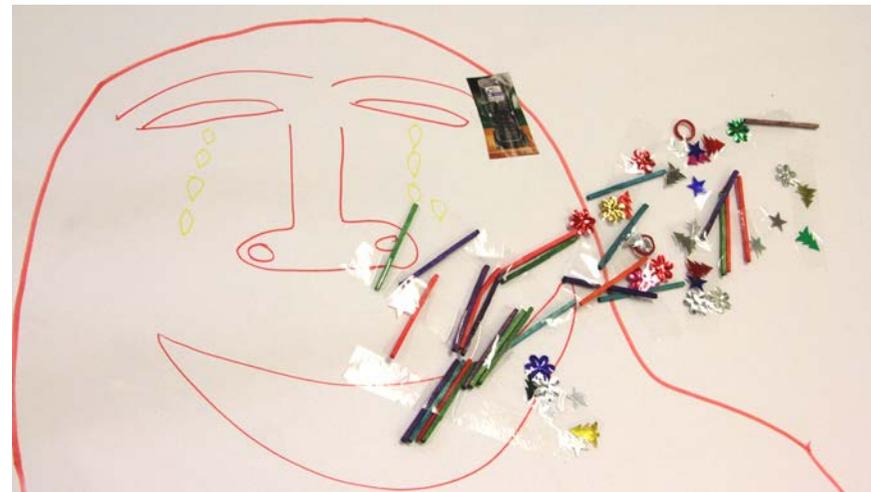
Theme 1: The Shadow of the Past

- Lifelong adversity for birth parents contributed to and compounded by child removal.
- Residual emotions left many wary, defensive and hyper-sensitised to signs of judgment.
- Carers out of their depth in knowing how to respond to birth parents
- Seeing birth parents and siblings was a highly charged experience
- Could retrigger trauma and cause behaviour dysregulation



Theme 2: Getting to know each other

- Foster carers and birth parents often from very different worlds
- Need to overcome fears about how other sees them, role uncertainties.
- Supervised contact tended to prevent relationships from forming naturally
- Caseworkers can play a vital role in helping carers and birth parents to deepen relationship



Theme 3: Stumbling blocks

- **Barriers to relationships:**
 - environmental factors for birth family
 - adapting to the new situation/ roles
 - fragile family ties in kinship care
 - child safety concerns
 - agency practices related to risk to child
- How carers and birth parents dealt with problems – make/break
- Agencies can serve as a buffer but often the price was a stunted relationship



Theme 4: Making family time

Moving from legal requirement to normal part of life took:

- Attitude shift about the past and openness to change
- Clear boundaries and roles
- Predictability (when, where, who, what)
- Adults enable children to lead activities
- Focus on child's interests, important people and parental circumstances



Theme 5: A shared future

Some families had created a new entity that blended two families

- Adults had clarity about roles and decision-making authority
- Accepted child's equal but different connections to both families
- Pragmatic about future challenges
- Optimistic that they could face them together (trust, respect)



Results- key messages

- Relationships formed by permanent removal - developmental life span
- Guardianship/open adoption more evolved than long-term foster care
- Caseworkers can help adults move from uncertainty and fear to viewing each other as being forever connected by their love for child.
- Children happy when they spent time regularly with birth relatives and involved in meaningful and age-appropriate activities.
- Seeing siblings whom they did not live with was a particularly important feature of contact for children.

Implications for policy and practice

Need for a consistent, trauma-informed approach to contact

Recruit and train caseworkers with skills to:

- Listen with sensitivity and compassion
- Model open, respectful communication
- Lead difficult conversations, negotiate process for information exchange

Help birth parents:

- Attend contact
- Debrief and plan future visits
- Recover and adjust post-removal

Recruitment and training for carers:

- Display empathy and be non-judgmental
- Understand (and take into account) effects of trauma on parents & children

Thank You

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