

# Shining a light on good practice in NSW 2014

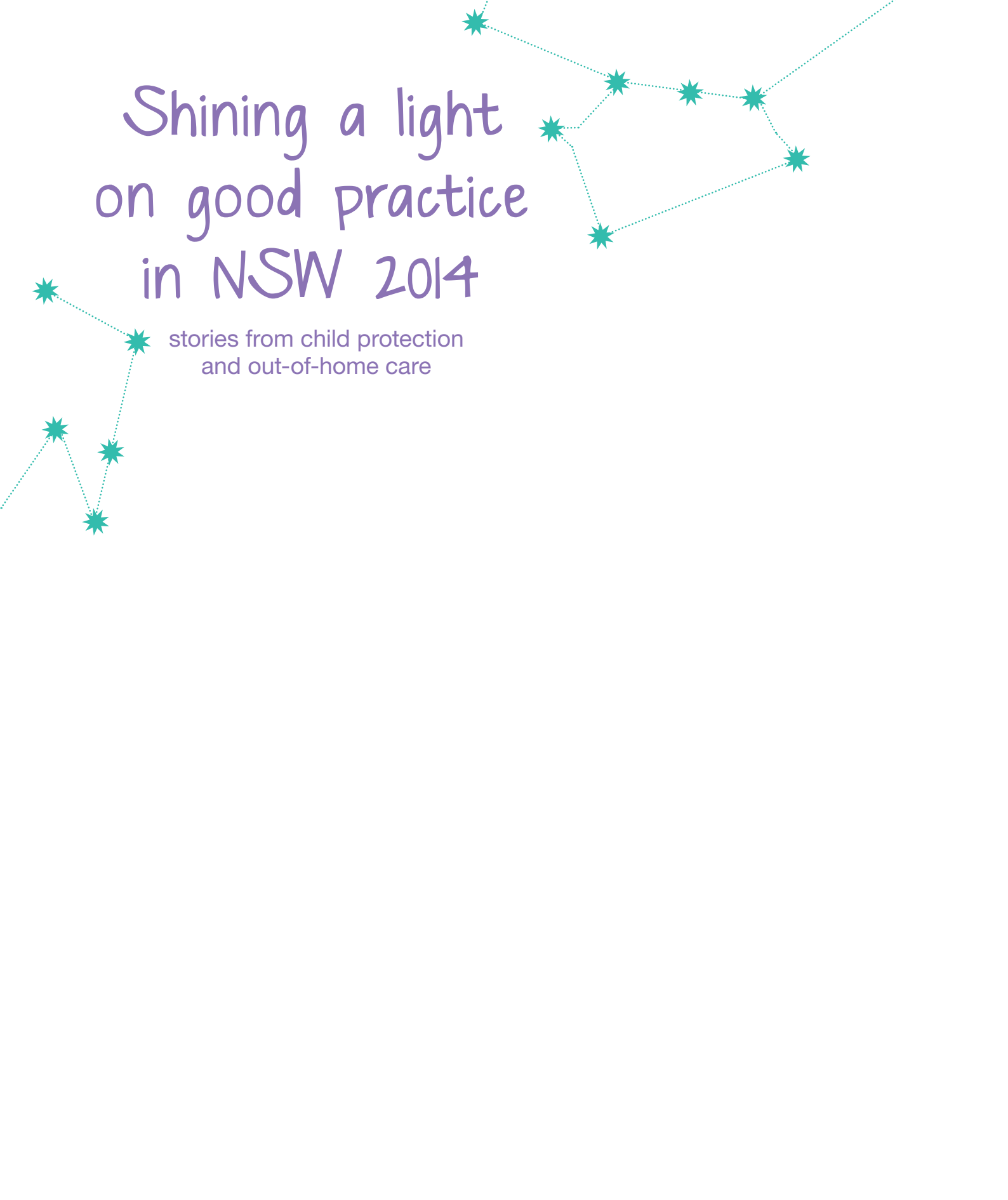
stories from child protection  
and out-of-home care



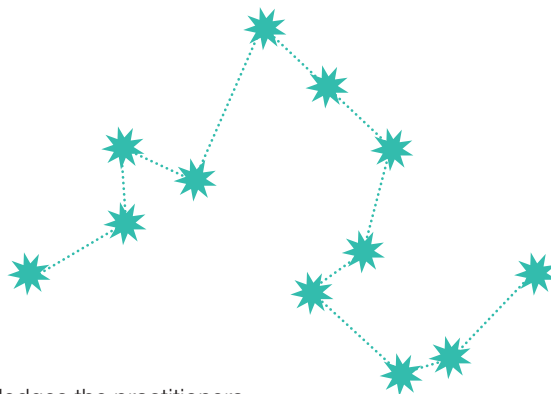
Family &  
Community  
Services

# Shining a light on good practice in NSW 2014

stories from child protection  
and out-of-home care



# Acknowledgements



The Department of Family and Community Services gratefully acknowledges the practitioners who shared their stories of good practice and their positive impact on children and families.

The report recognises the work of many practitioners from the NSW Government and non-government organisations including:

- CREATE Foundation
- Life Without Barriers
- Marist Youth Care
- Red Cross Young Parent's Program
- Rosie's Place
- Settlement Services International Inc.

The photos in the report feature the children, young people, practitioners, foster carers and parents whose stories are depicted. While practitioners have used their own names, the names of children, young people, parents and carers have been changed to protect their identity. The exception is Nathan in 'On his own two feet'. After reading his story Nathan requested his real name be used.

Thanks to everyone who was open to being photographed and to renowned Australian photographer, Tamara Dean, for the warmth she captured in the images.

Photos © Tamara Dean.

## Design concept

The stars featured throughout the report, represent the concept of wishing for a better life – 'wish upon a star'.

*Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* is a universal lullaby that many children learn during childhood. This verse introduces practitioners as pivotal in 'lighting up a life' and helping improve outcomes for children and young people.

*'When the traveller in the dark, thanks you for your tiny spark.  
He would not know which way to go, if you did not twinkle so.'*

These combined make up the vision behind the graphic design for this year's report.

A series of stars is used to create a visual representation of each story, with the dots representing crucial points in each journey.

Each story has its own sequence of stars to represent each child and parent's path in life.

# Minister's foreword

It is my great pleasure to introduce this year's *Shining a light on good practice in NSW* report. The report aims to inspire and influence good practice.

Once again, the report illuminates the struggles, success and joy of child protection work. It shows what can be achieved when children are kept front and centre of our work and good practitioners are supported to make brave decisions.

Each page tells the real life stories of children and families and the commitment of practitioners from Family and Community Services and our non-government partners. The stories will tug at your heart strings and lift your spirits.

From newborns to adolescents on the brink of adulthood, the stories show how the professionalism, care and optimism of good practitioners can be life changing.

It is also a report filled with hope. Hope that with the right support, families can stay together and when this just isn't possible, children and young people are supported while we secure them a safe home and happiness.

Time and again, I was impressed by what can be achieved when practitioners share their knowledge and work collaboratively to help children and families. The challenges facing families today are complex. When government and non-government workers join together, their combined expertise and hard work make all the difference.

I thank all of the practitioners who shared their stories and the generosity of the families and carers who feature in the beautiful photos throughout the report.

Most importantly, thanks must go to all the children and young people whose lives feature within these pages. I wish you the brightest of futures.



**Gabrielle Upton**

Minister for Family and Community Services



# Introduction from the Office of the Senior Practitioner



Harper Lee wrote 'You never really understand a person until you consider him from his point of view. Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it'.

The real work of child protection – building relationships to keep children safe – depends on practitioners who have the skills to help people change. At the heart of a strong helping relationship is a skilled practitioner who is tenacious, curious and compassionate. They understand how each child and family cope because they have climbed inside their skin. At the same time, and as importantly, they have built very clear and shared understandings about safety and they have never lost their focus on the experience of the child.

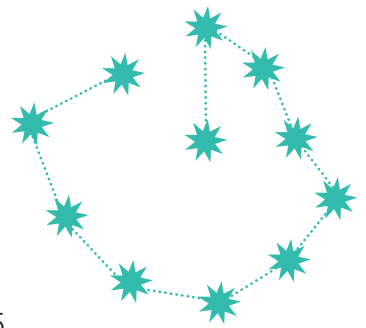
It's this balance of empathy and gentle authority that is the defining feature of excellent practice. And it is common in each of the stories in this report and the reason they were selected above so many others. All of the stories are about outstanding people who deserve recognition for the lives they have changed and the hope they have given and all of the stories are about courage and care. There is no doubt that child protection work can be hard and it is certainly not for everyone. May these stories be proof that it can also be immensely rewarding and its impacts can extend into generations of relationships.

The other stand out feature through the stories is practitioners who have been tireless in their role of championing and advocating for our most vulnerable. Their conviction about the absolute right of all children to be cherished and protected drives their work. They want for vulnerable children what everyone else wants for their own – for that we all owe them much gratitude.

It has been such a privilege for us in the OSP to pull together this collection of stories and to work alongside such honourable people to describe such honourable work. We hope you love this report as much as we do – may it make you proud of NSW practitioners and fill you with enormous respect for the work they do.

**Kate Alexander**  
Executive Director  
Office of the Senior Practitioner

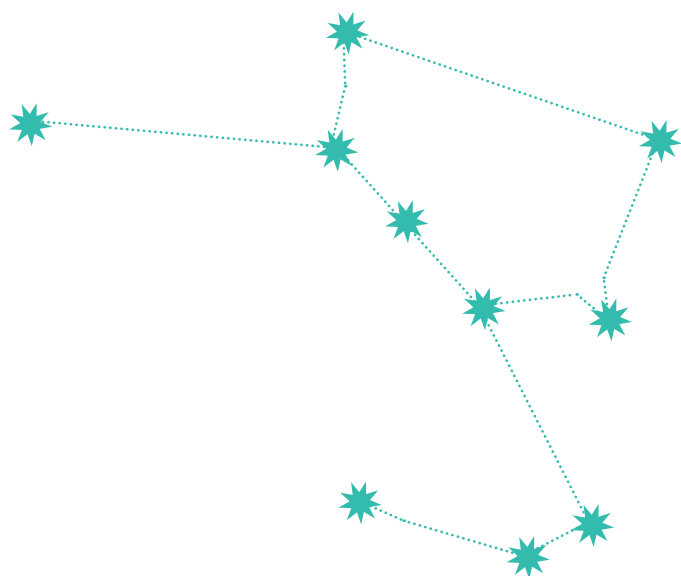
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Charlotte, caseworker, Kaylee, daughter and Hannah, mum.



# It felt like we were a team

I never felt like Kait and Charlotte were just my caseworkers, it felt like we were a team – that we all had the same goal. This made it easier to give up drugs. Kait and Charlotte were looking out for me and I didn't want to let them down.

Hannah, mum



## Hannah

I had no idea I was pregnant until just before Kaylee was born. I was 20 years old at the time and I didn't have any signs of pregnancy.

I didn't really put on weight and I never felt sick or run-down. Looking back, this might have been because of the drugs I was taking.

The day I went into labour I was at my (now ex) partner, Dave's house. I was having really bad stomach pains so Dave called an ambulance. It was too late – Kaylee arrived before the ambulance did and Dave had to deliver her.

Dave was taken to hospital because he was in shock. I was in shock too – I remember the paramedics telling me I should hold Kaylee but I just didn't think she was real. I was so scared, I had never even changed a nappy, never mind everything else that comes with being a parent. But everyone was so helpful and kind to me at the hospital and I started to feel really excited about being a mum.

A social worker from the hospital came to see me. She recommended the Red Cross Young Parent's Program and said someone from FACS would also visit me in hospital. As soon as I heard this I was so worried – I'd been using drugs before Kaylee was born and during the pregnancy. I decided to tell the social worker about the drugs. I just thought it would be better for me if I was honest with everyone.

*I didn't know much about FACS, other than the stories I'd seen on television. But as soon as Charlotte walked into the room I knew she was there to help us.*

Charlotte was so nice and supportive – I felt a bit more comfortable about them being

involved. I told her I was going to stop using drugs and that I wanted to give Kaylee a really good life.

After I left hospital things were good for a while but then Dave and I started fighting. I also started using drugs again.

About this time I went for an interview to join the Red Cross program with Kait. Kait told me I wouldn't get in if I kept using. I knew Red Cross could help me keep Kaylee in my care so I had to make changes. After that interview, I started to do everything I could to make sure I got into the program, including stopping the drugs. I was accepted.

I moved out of Dave's and found my own place. Kait and Charlotte were visiting me and things were going really well. Then one day Kaylee and I were with Dave when he got arrested. That was a really hard time for me and I used drugs again. I was honest with everyone and had some pretty tough conversations with Charlotte and Kait.

Charlotte told me this was my last chance and I could lose Kaylee if I kept using. Even though it was one lapse, it was a final wake-up call for me and I knew what I needed to do.

I was selfish before I had Kaylee but now I had to be responsible for my little girl. She needed her mum.

It wasn't easy to give up drugs like I thought it would be. Fortunately I had lots of good support from my family, counsellor, Kait and Charlotte. I was always really honest with Charlotte. I knew there was no point lying to her. Charlotte would never make me feel bad when I messed up. Even when things were hard, I didn't dread her visits, I was always happy for her to come and see me and I was

always comfortable talking to her. She was so helpful. She would offer to drive me places and was always looking out for us.

Kait made me feel better when things were tough. She was gentle and kind when she spoke to me. Our conversations with her were insightful and I always came out knowing what I could do to fix the problem.

I never felt like Kait and Charlotte were just my caseworkers, it felt like we were a team – that we all had the same goal. This made it easier to give up drugs. I didn't want to let them down.

Charlotte gave me another chance after I messed up. I know she didn't need to – she could have taken Kaylee away when I started using again. This is part of the reason why I

tried so hard, I didn't want to fail her. I wanted to show her the risk she had taken had been worth it. I would have been ashamed of myself if I had let people down.

Now I think I am ready to make the rules in my life and be independent. It's been nine months since I last used and I'm looking to move out of social housing and rent a place. I'm studying at TAFE now and my goal is to get off Centrelink and get a job. I see other people my age saving for a deposit on their own home and I want to do the same. I'm a bit behind but I know I'll catch up. I've proven to myself I can live independently and take care of another person. Kaylee makes it so easy for me to love her – she is such a happy baby.



## Charlotte, Family and Community Services caseworker

I first met Hannah right after Kaylee was born and I visited them in hospital. We got a report that Hannah had been using ice and marijuana during her pregnancy. She was homeless and because she didn't know that she was pregnant she hadn't had any antenatal care.

When I walked into the hospital room Hannah was holding her baby. She looked happy, relaxed and was responding to all of Kaylee's cues.

*Hannah seemed determined to make a good life for Kaylee and stop using drugs. She thought it would be easy. Maybe she was a little over-optimistic about this. In a way though, it helped with our casework - it was something we could build on.*

I was probably a little over optimistic myself. But I was always clear with Hannah that she needed to work hard to stop using drugs and she would need lots of support.

The hospital had already made referrals to the Red Cross young parent's program and a midwife support program. Hannah had decided to live with her partner Dave while she was waiting to get into Red Cross.

Things started to deteriorate when Hannah was living with Dave. Services were having trouble getting in touch and she missed a couple of drug tests. She gave me excuses why she couldn't make the tests and they sounded legitimate, especially as she had a newborn and couldn't drive. In hindsight, I think Hannah probably started using drugs much earlier than I thought.

When Kaylee was just over a month old, Hannah tested positive for drugs. After this, I realised I didn't know as much as I needed to about how ice affects a person, especially their parenting. I consulted our Clinical Issues Unit and watched videos of people under the influence of ice. This was consistent with Hannah's behaviour – she was very fidgety when we met and sometimes would be almost jumping off her seat. I also learnt when someone takes ice they can feel the affects for up to two to three days, and it could take two days to come down.

*When I thought about what this meant for Hannah's parenting, I realised her drug use wouldn't work for a tiny baby.*

For three days Hannah could be so high she wouldn't really be with it, then for two days she would be coming down and would probably need to take something else to take the edge off. I was concerned about how Hannah would be able to put Kaylee first.

Naturally, Red Cross were also concerned. I went to the meeting with Hannah and argued for her to be given a chance. They took her on the condition that she would work really hard to address her drug use. She lapsed once after being in the Red Cross program.

After her relapse, Kait and I had some hard conversations with Hannah. I told her we had given her all the chances we could. The bottom line was that she needed to start making some better decisions. I told Hannah I couldn't leave Kaylee in her care unless she started to protect her.

Thinking back, Hannah's relapse was a turning point for us. I could have chosen to see her behaviour as manipulative and the case plan as unworkable, but I tried to understand

where she was coming from and really, she needed as much education as I did about what her drug use meant for Kaylee.

I believe children should be with their parents where we can make it work. Removal is such a huge thing for a young baby. Kaylee deserved a chance to live with her mum.

*If we want to keep families together we need to have faith that a parent can change. I had faith in Hannah and I knew she could change. Underneath it all, she always had this drive that was pushing her along.*

There were times when I didn't agree with the other services. The drug counsellor and I had a couple of tricky conversations about the best plan. The counsellor's view was that relapse was part of the recovery process. While it was good to hear this, I also needed to be clear about what Kaylee needed. We both had to be on same page about Kaylee. In the end, I learnt a lot from her expertise and I hope that she learnt from me as well.

When I closed Kaylee's case, I wrote Hannah a letter and said that I hope she kept it to show Kaylee when she was older.

I want Kaylee to be proud of her mum, for all the hard work that she did to keep Kaylee with her. She is a beautiful baby and I'm proud of the great job that Hannah has done with her so far.

## Kait, Red Cross caseworker

When I first met Hannah she came across as pleasant, polite and friendly. She was eager to join our program. I remember her thanking me for the opportunity and telling me that she wouldn't let me down. I never had a young mum make a promise like that before.

Hannah moved into her new home and I began to visit her weekly. We quickly developed a good relationship and over time our conversations became more meaningful. I remember her telling me a few times about how she wanted to focus her energy on the positives in her life – Kaylee, having her own home and her studies. I believe Hannah truly understood if she continued to use, Kaylee would be removed and she would lose her place in our program. She made such great changes in her life – it was beautiful to watch.

The tag-team approach with Charlotte was fundamental to our work together because we were on the same page. Hannah knew I shared information with Charlotte and our joint home visits helped reinforce this. I felt supported by Charlotte and I knew she respected my opinion.

With help, Hannah has built a safe and stable family environment for her daughter. She comes to parenting groups with our program and Kaylee is thriving. We are looking forward to supporting her to live independently. ●



# Reflection

What a great outcome for Kaylee and her mum Hannah. It is very clear that Hannah was driven to be able to continue to love and care for her daughter, Kaylee and was supported to do so by a dedicated casework team who worked honestly and upfront with her. Hannah through working with Charlotte and Kait sought their support and was honest about her problems which showed she was contemplating change.

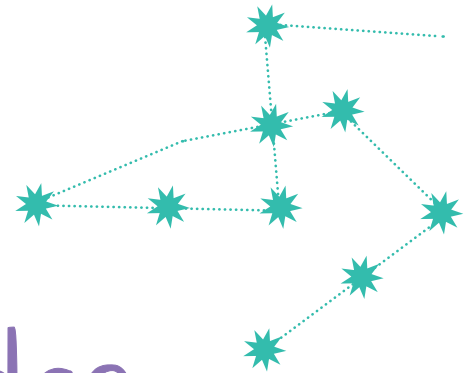
A successful partnership is highly dependent upon the practitioners' capacity to communicate genuine respect for, interest in and commitment to parents regardless of the conditions that have brought about statutory involvement.

Charlotte was able to reflect on her own practice and assumptions which enabled her to access clinical expertise to improve her knowledge base about the impacts of drugs on parenting capacity. This meant that she was better able to understand the impacts of Hannah's behaviour on her ability to parent and to have the tough conversations to make sure Kaylee was safe. As Hannah stated they all worked as part of a very effective team to support Hannah in continuing to care for her daughter.

Both Charlotte and Kait worked with Hannah from a strengths-based perspective but also were frank about when there were risks for Kaylee when things weren't working as well.

Research and practice experience indicates that engagement is a dynamic process where there will be elements of connection and withdrawal, shared understanding and dispute, which may require tenacity and persistence by all parties, including in this case Hannah.

Anne Campbell, Executive Director Policy Programs and Strategy,  
Department of Family and Community Services



# A dog called Mudge

Our thoughts kept coming back to the children. What were their needs? What can we do to make sure they get the best possible carers? I talked to Sophie and Josh about what they wanted. Sophie's list included having her own room and a dog.

Jess, Child Protection Caseworker, Department of Family and Community Services





Sophie, Josh and Mudge the dog.



Like many of our children, Sophie and Josh's story begins before they were born. Their older siblings had been in foster care for a number of years. Our office is in a close-knit coastal community and our team knew this Aboriginal family well. Their sister Casey and brother Mitchell were lovely kids, so the whole office had a lot of affection for them.

When we received really worrying reports that six-year-old Sophie and five-year-old Josh were not safe, I was determined to support the family and prevent history repeating itself.

I had a lot on my plate at the time but I put my hand up to take on this case.

Our office had just introduced the Practice First model. Following its principles, I spent a lot of time with the family, before and after school, to really understand what it was like to be in Sophie and Josh's shoes. We worked on breaking the family's entrenched pattern of violence and neglect. Mum had grown up in a home where severe violence and abuse was the norm. On top of the violence, the children were missing out on some very basic levels of care like regular meals, schooling and routines.

Mum was open and honest about her life and accepted that we needed to be involved. I think it helped that the hard conversations we had were always honest and respectful. It was very difficult for her to see the impact the violence was having on her kids or how her violent partners brought danger and instability into the lives of her young children. I persevered for as long as possible. However, we came to the gut-wrenching realisation that even though she loved her

children so much, she just couldn't give them the right level of care or a home free from abuse.

*The children are a delight – Sophie is bubbly, bossy and loves everything pink while Joshua, a budding comedian, is sensitive and a great swimmer – they needed a better life.*

In the beginning Josh and Sophie lived with two gorgeous temporary carers. In the seven months they had together, they worked so hard to help the children learn the basic life skills they had missed. From dressing themselves, getting ready for school and eating healthy meals together. Sophie and Josh's progress was amazing. However, this placement was not meant to be forever so I started looking for a permanent Aboriginal family.

Sadly, in the midst of all this, their temporary foster father was diagnosed with cancer. We needed to accelerate the search. In the end it took six months. Finding their placement was one of the hardest things I've ever done as a caseworker.

As a Practice First site we were really focused together as a team on getting it right for the long term. Our thoughts kept coming back to the children. What were their needs? What can we do to make sure they get the best possible carers?

We were looking for an Aboriginal family and one that would be able to support Josh's complex needs, which includes a developmental delay that affects his learning and memory.

I talked to Sophie and Josh about what they wanted. Sophie's list included having her own room and a dog.



We trawled through the family network for kinship options and tracked down their paternal grandfather Trevor, a respected elder in western NSW. He hadn't seen his grandchildren since they were toddlers when his son and daughter-in-law separated.

Trevor was really respectful when we talked to him about why his grandchildren had needed to come into care. We talked a lot about Sophie and Josh's lives and at one point he said to me, 'You did the right thing'.

This was one of the most significant moments in my career so far – I will never forget him saying that. It is so tricky to balance the historical context of Aboriginal children being removed, with what is happening today for a particular child. As a non-Aboriginal caseworker bringing Aboriginal children into care, the burden to make the right decision is enormous.

Trevor was a strong advocate for his grandchildren. He searched all over western NSW, where they had many relatives, to try to find someone who may be able to care for them.

Each step of the way we returned to Sophie and Josh, and also the important people in their lives – Casey and Mitchell, their mum, temporary carers, Aboriginal services and our own child and family referral unit.

Sadly, despite best efforts and many months of hard work, we couldn't find an Aboriginal family that could meet their needs.

Out of the blue one Friday afternoon, we were sent a carer profile from another district. After reading it through, I went straight to my manager and said, 'We've found them'. I just had a sense this would be the family.

Their temporary carers were so important in helping us find the right home for Sophie and Josh. While I worked with the children and cared about them so much, it was their carers who knew them best. I really valued their insights. So I rang them and read out the profile over the phone. When they said, 'They sound just like us', I was excited.



Sophie and Josh with their carers Selina and Frank.

The new carers, Selina and Frank, are a middle-aged couple who don't have children of their own. Selina has an Indian-Fijian background. I thought this was a real strength as it meant she understood what it was like to come from a different cultural background and the importance culture plays in identity.

Selina spoke openly about her culture and I knew it would be powerful for the children to live with someone who was so proud of their heritage.

In a weird coincidence the temporary carers had a dog named Smudge and the new carers had a dog named Mudge – it was definitely a sign. I was so glad about that dog because it really mattered to Sophie.

*I rang Trevor because it was important for me to hear his views on the new carers. It was incredibly moving to hear him say, 'I don't care what colour they are, as long as they take good care of my grandchildren'.*

Getting Trevor's okay was the green light I needed.

Preparing the children for their new home was a team effort. I spoke with everyone in the kids' lives. This strong collaborative approach gave the children a sense of safety and reassurance as they prepared to move.

The transition happened in an evolving and dynamic way. It was important we followed the natural pace of a young child, not one that was simply convenient for the adults involved. We made colourful calendars with lots of pictures so Sophie and Josh knew what was happening each day. We gradually introduced the children to Selina and Frank, starting with

phone calls and sharing photographs. From meeting their new carers at a picnic, to their first sleepover, we wanted to slowly familiarise them with their new family. All in all it took around four weeks for them to officially move in. We had a party on the last day to celebrate this milestone with the people who loved and cared about Sophie and Josh.

*It was really moving when Casey said to Sophie and Josh, 'Mum loves us but she can't look after us'. Similarly, it was so powerful for the children to hear.*

Involving Casey was a deliberate and important part of the plan. Casey, wise for her 16 years, is living happily in a stable foster family. The younger siblings love and look up to her, so she is a great role model for what life can be like in foster care.

Casey's involvement was also a profound experience for her, which is something I hadn't expected. She could see all the concern and work we put into her brother and sister's care, which then made her reflect on her own experience in foster care.

She told me afterwards that she later rang her caseworker to thank him for everything he had done for her and invited him to her graduation. He said he would be there with bells on. It was really special that all of this thoughtful casework practice created not only a new beginning for her little brother and sister, but also an opportunity for Casey to heal.

As Selina and Frank aren't Aboriginal, I did lots of research about Aboriginal services in the local area and celebrations the children could attend as part of creating their cultural plan. Selina and Frank are fantastic and are open to anything that will help the children

maintain their cultural identity and are planning a trip to Uluru next year.

A major part of their cultural plan is staying connected to Sophie and Josh's birth family. Mum has regular visits and is happy with where the children are living. There are plans for Casey to come and stay with her brother and sister and Trevor recently visited his grandchildren for the first time in years. He is in contact with Selina and Frank so he can be a bigger part of Sophie's and Josh's lives in an informal way. Sophie and Josh also spend time with Aboriginal respite carers visit their extended family out west which the kids will love.

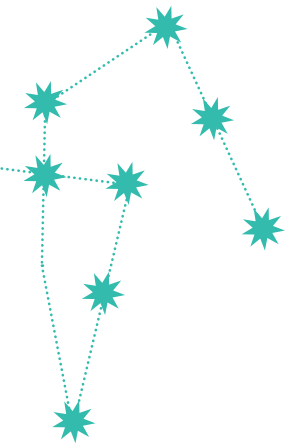
Josh has bonded well with Frank. They share a quirky sense of humour, both love animals and Frank has been teaching him carpentry skills – even building Sophie a wardrobe. Having only been around men who are inconsistent and violent, it is wonderful to

see Josh flourish under the care of a gentle man. When I ask Sophie about her new foster Mum she tells me she is 'so beautiful'.

The other day I took a call from Josh and Sophie's temporary carer who is doing really well – winning his fight against cancer. He told me it was thinking about Josh's bright spark that kept him motivated throughout his chemotherapy. As soon as he doesn't need chemotherapy every day, the first thing he wants to do is visit the kids in their new home.

It is still early days for this new 'forever family'. They are taking time to fall in love with one another and form a bond. Just as requested, Sophie and Joshua each have their own bedroom, two dogs and some pet sheep thrown in as well.

Josh and Sophie are surrounded by those who love them – they have that affect on people. ●



# Reflection

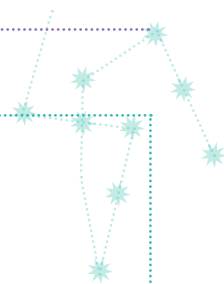
It was such a joy to read this story because of the warmth and respect that Jess, the caseworker, had for everyone - family, foster carers and, most importantly, Sophie and Josh.

I like how Jess asked Sophie and Josh's temporary foster carers for their opinion about the children's 'forever family'. Foster carers spend the most one-on-one time with children in care and their insights are invaluable, so it's great to see Jess recognise and value their views.

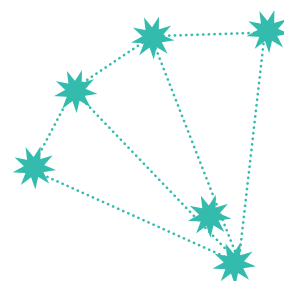
Children in foster care crave stability and the effort everyone put into the transition plan was extraordinary. What I loved best was the party when the children moved to Selina and Frank's. This was a life-changing event and it deserved to be celebrated. I am sure this positive approach also helped Sophie and Josh deal with the sadness of leaving their original carers.

Stories like this remind us how important it is to spend time and carefully consider all the options before making a decision about a child's permanent care. As Sophie and Josh grow up and have questions about their past, I hope it will comfort them to know Jess was so invested in finding them the best home and how loved they were by everyone they touched along the way.

Rita Fenech, Manager, Connecting Carers







# We're still a family

Something Tania and I are really strong advocates for is tailoring plans for different circumstances. Often the courts will order contact with a child's birth family four times a year. That's not child focused. We've managed to make much more regular contact work. Other workers may say, 'What? They're having contact two to four times a week? You can't sustain that'. But we're saying you can. If it's safe for the children and the foster carer it can happen. This case shines a light on that.

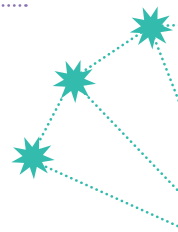
Lyn, Caseworker, Department of Family and Community Services





Kirra, Sally, Jenny, Kim (sitting). Trent, Christian (standing).





**Lyn:** Sally and her four children Trent (six), Kim (five), Christian (three) and Kirra (two) have been known to us since before Trent was born. The children had seen and heard lots of pretty awful violence from their dad toward Sally. After their parents split up, they stayed with their mum but we still had concerns there was ongoing abuse and neglect.

When we visited and spent time with the children we saw their basic needs weren't being met. Sally has an intellectual disability which impacts on her capacity as a parent. She loves her children, no doubt about it, but she struggled to create a safe home and the children's health, hygiene, and overall development was really suffering.

The children's dad wasn't involved in their life anymore. He also has a serious illness, meaning it was more important than ever that we did everything we could to support Sally to care for the children and keep their family together.

Initially my involvement with the family was to support Sally's engagement with The Canopy which is an intensive family preservation service. They would visit up to five times a week, working long hours with Sally.

*I would often pop in and see how the kids were or if there was any extra casework that needed to be done. Sally saw FACS and The Canopy as being really supportive, like a second family.*

Things were starting to run well for the family when The Canopy was involved intensively. Sally was excited and knew this was the way family life was meant to be, even though I knew she hadn't had the same experience as a child.

**Tania:** The service was meant to finish up with the family within 12 months but they continued on with Sally. They really went above and beyond.

**Lyn:** Every time we reduced support, things would very quickly slip back to the way they were. The care of the children deteriorated and their emotional and physical needs were not being met. We wanted to believe this family could stay together but we had to face the fact that there was no real change and not enough safety.

We had some hard conversations with Sally because the Child Protection Helpline continued to receive reports from the community about the children's welfare. It was important to give her the opportunity to say what was happening from her perspective. You have to listen to what the family is saying about what's happening for them, rather than telling them. Actually give them the space to talk.

We got to a point where we knew the children couldn't live safely at home with Sally even with all the support we could give her. She knew it too. I think the trust we had built with Sally made her feel comfortable enough to say 'I can't look after my kids'. It was a really hard thing for her to do.

**Lyn:** When Sally said to me she couldn't care for the children, she was so upset but asked that we make sure that the kids go to 'really nice homes'. She was putting the children's needs before her own. She didn't understand the system well enough to know that she would still be able to see them, but she still put those kids' needs first. We had lots of talks about what it would be like for her children to go into foster care and that she would be able to see them.

**Tania:** Sally always talks openly about loving her children and wanting the best for them. Just the other day I thanked her for always putting her children's needs above her own. She's always done that.

**Lyn:** I think what worked with Sally was building up that trust and relationship before it got to that crisis moment. By developing those relationships, parents aren't hesitant to reach out. They ring to say, 'This has happened, what can I do?' rather than trying to hide and things escalate even further.

After a time, Tania took over as their caseworker. Sally really developed strong trust in what we were doing and Tania was able to maintain this.

**Tania:** When I talk with Sally I have to be very mindful of my language and not to use jargon. I break up the information, make it meaningful and let her process it at her own pace. Despite how busy I may be, my job is to make her feel like I have all the time in the world just for her.

I need Sally to come to realisations in her own way. There's no point me sitting there saying that's not going to work for A, B and C reasons. I need to give her hypotheticals and scenarios to let her come to that natural conclusion.

Everything I've done I've told Sally about. Even going to court, I explained the whole process about what would happen, how long it would take. On the court date we met her there. Afterwards she came out, broke down and cried. I drove her to her house where the kids were waiting. She had been washing their clothes. We got them out of the dryer, folded them and then we packed up all the kids bags together.

*Sally kept on saying 'I'm not going to cry. I'm going to be strong' and she did it. She got the kids ready without crying. I don't know how, I would have been a mess, but she did it.*

The kids were in the car. They were ready to go.





We looked for carers who were open to regular contact with mum, including phone calls whenever the kids wanted to speak with her. She could reassure them that everything was okay. It wouldn't have worked any other way.

We always wanted the kids placed together, they were such a tight little sibling group. Initially they weren't, but then one set of carers said they wanted to have them all long term. Through contact between the siblings this carer, Jenny, had gotten to know the two girls and she said, 'We can do this'. When they all moved in, Jenny couldn't believe how well they blended with her natural family. Sally was relieved all the kids were together.

**Lyn:** I saw the children not long after they were placed with Jenny and her family and I didn't recognise them. I was just blown away by the difference. It was great because it reinforced our decision.

**Tania:** It's unbelievable the changes in them, just incredible. They had rarely brushed their teeth before they came into care. All Trent and Christian wanted to do was brush their teeth – three to four times a day because they just weren't used to the sensation.

Every time Kim had a bath she would ask 'Are FACS coming?' and Jenny would say no, and the next night again she would ask. When Jenny asked her why she thought FACS were coming, Kim said 'Because we only have a bath when FACS come'.

Everything was so new to them, even little basic things that we would take for granted.

**Lyn:** When the kids went into care and presented so beautifully and told stories about all the amazing things they were doing,

you could see Sally was so happy this was happening for them. Sally would say to her children that she wanted them to live with Jenny, in a sense, she gave them her blessing to be happy.

**Tania:** It was important that Sally could be involved in her children's life, to be their mother, but just not provide primary care. She goes to the kids' swimming lessons twice a week and Little Athletics on a Saturday. She goes to school functions and sporting ceremonies. If there is nothing on, they'll get together and have a picnic or barbeque.

**Tania:** The kids are doing so well now. Trent was picked on at school because of his home life. He didn't have many friends and didn't know how to make them. There was no light. Now he loves school, he can read and has friends and he's a very fast runner. He is just thriving.

Jenny told us the other day that Trent learnt about healthy eating and body care at school. He collected all the materials, brought them home and said, 'I've got to give this to mum because she's got to look after herself too'. We always worried that Trent would parent Sally but now he's able to care for her in a way that is safe and still have a childhood.

We used to have trouble understanding what Christian was saying. When I visited Jenny's home they had sight words all over the house and he was so excited to run around saying the words.

Little Kirra has also come along in leaps and bounds. She would get very anxious, had trouble sleeping and could only say a few words. Now her vocabulary is growing and

she is able to express her feelings. She is happy and settled.

**Tania:** Even though our focus was on the children, we couldn't leave Sally without support. When we brought the kids into care, she was still living in a three-bedroom house but was going to have to give the keys back. We worked with our colleagues in housing to get her into a one-bedroom apartment near the children. We made a joint referral to National Disability Insurance Scheme so she could have ongoing support.

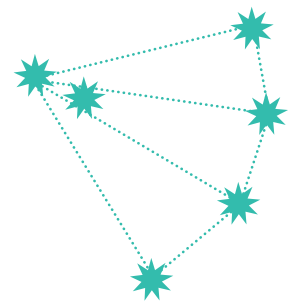
**Lyn:** Something Tania and I are really strong advocates for is tailoring plans for different circumstances. Often the courts will order contact with a child's birth family four times a year. That's not child focused. We've managed to make much more regular contact work. Other workers may say, 'What? They're having contact two to four times a week? You can't sustain that'. But we're saying you can. If it's safe for the children and the foster carer it can happen. I think this case shines a light on that.

## Sally

At first I thought they were going to be really mean people but they ended up being really nice people who wanted to help me. Tania is really really good. I really like her. If I have any questions, I can ask her. She actually explains things to me so I understand. Because I have a disability and it's about not understanding things properly, people can't just have one conversation with me for me to understand. I'm working on those skills.

I realised that I did need help because I wasn't doing anything good for the kids because I wasn't doing any good for myself. FACS made me realise that. They helped me think 'Maybe I can work on all this, maybe I can show FACS, I can show my kids and I can show myself I can do it'. At first you might think they're being harsh but they're doing what they can do to make you a better person for your kids.

Getting to see the kids means the world to me. Every time I look forward to it. That's the best thing about it all. ●



# Reflection

This is such an uplifting story – a minor triumph of selflessness by Lyn and Tania, and ultimately by Sally and the children’s carer Kim, that has transformed the lives and prospects of the four siblings.

It was a huge achievement to establish a trusting relationship with Sally, given her cognitive disability and her traumatising experience of domestic violence. And then knowing what Sally had survived, knowing how she felt about her children, it must have been difficult for Lyn and Tania to challenge Sally to accept she couldn’t protect and adequately care for her children.

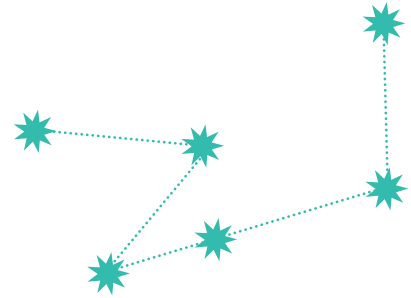
The scene of Tania and Lyn helping Sally take her children’s clothes out of the dryer and pack their bags as they left to enter care is so poignant and powerfully illustrates how Lyn and Tania managed to respect and care for Sally while always keeping the needs of the children at the centre of their work.

It might have been easier for Lyn and Tania if they’d held themselves apart from Sally, but by earning Sally’s trust they made it possible for her to support her children’s placement in care and to maintain regular and supportive contact.

The details that Lyn and Tania provide about Sally and her children evidence the extent to which they’ve respectfully and compassionately noticed and considered each as an individual and as a member of the family. This effort of empathy, combined with objective professional judgement and courageous honesty has produced a great result, not just for the children but for Sally.

Michael Coutts-Trotter, Secretary, Department of Family and Community Services





There but for the  
grace of God go I

Child protection work is really hard. It is people's lives we're dealing with – the stakes are high.

Michell, Caseworker, Department of Family and Community Services





Michell, caseworker.



I have to admit I was really nervous and a bit stuck about what else we could do when I presented this family in group supervision. I was worried about a five-year-old girl Tahlia and her mum.

We had received a report about serious domestic violence perpetrated by Sara's current partner, Leroy. They had broken up and got back together lots of times. Sara's three previous partners had been violent and she had been subjected to trauma as a child in her own family. Tahlia was placed in care for three months when she was a baby because of the violence.

When I took the case to group supervision I was not feeling hopeful. In fact I was feeling a bit helpless given all that had been tried before without any real change. Sara had exhausted a lot of options, using a number of local support services aimed at helping her overcome her own historic trauma, recent violence and protect herself and Tahlia.

Sara was committed to Leroy despite his drinking and violence. They were currently living apart but still seeing a lot of each other. I felt a lot of pressure given the strong, sad story of ongoing chronic and severe domestic violence in this young mum's life.

*Child protection work is really hard. It is people's lives we're dealing with – the stakes are high.*

There was a big risk that Leroy would seriously assault Sara while she and Tahlia were with him and Sara risked losing her again if this continued. But removing Tahlia from Sara was also potentially really damaging for Tahlia.

I have to admit I was expecting that a conversation with Sara would not go well.

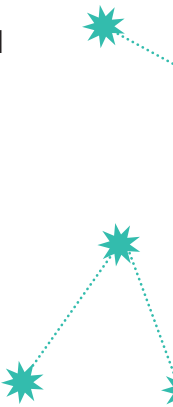
With her it has always been FACS telling her what to do and clearly that hadn't worked in the past. Fear gets caseworkers into bad habits and I was worried that if I was anxious I would be more directive and patronising. This would just increase Sara's powerlessness and her fear about our intervention when what she needed most was support and empowerment.

In supervision I was challenged by my colleagues to see things from a different angle. Being challenged is great if there is trust. It helps you to be open to new ideas and not take them as personal criticism. Group supervision helped me to understand Sara's strengths as a parent. My colleagues had witnessed the powerful bond between Sara and Tahlia when she had previously been removed and how they had fretted for each other. There was no doubt they loved each other very much. Knowing this and talking it through helped me to plan a conversation with Sara that was very different from me telling her what to do.

I had noticed that Tahlia had a strong personality and at times was a bit bossy with her mum. I wondered how much this might be about how she had seen others treating Sara, or about Sara's confidence as a parent. Sara is timid and young and on the surface can appear to be a bit helpless. People can mistake that for being weak.

She had survived a lot in her young life and although she was not confident when you dig deeper you see a really strong resilient young woman. Seeing this and how she had battled on as a mum despite the odds really helped.

Supervision also gave me the opportunity to practise the conversation in a role play with my colleagues. I used to hate role plays; I



now love them! The role play and brainstorming Sara's strengths meant that when I visited her I could relax more and really listen.

The question which really opened up the conversation was asking Sara about the kind of life she had hoped of for Tahlia. Sara had clearly been thinking about this and was determined that she wanted Tahlia to be happy and to have a life that was free of violence. Then we drew a picture which illustrated her circle of key supports. It is called an eco map and it was really important in helping to understand what supports she currently had and what she valued.

One of the strongest supports she identified was Leroy. Sara said 'He listens to me and is there for me when I am feeling down'. It might have been tempting to challenge this but it was really important that I listened and didn't judge. Instead we talked about the importance of including Leroy in what Sara was trying to achieve for Tahlia.

I asked Sara what she was prepared to put up with. This was really different from me giving her ultimatums about what she had to do and making her choose between him and Tahlia. Instead I said I would like to meet him and talk with him.

Sara wanted to get counselling with Leroy and she felt empowered to talk to him about this. This gave her the chance to see whether he was prepared to make some changes too. She also told me about strategies that she was using to protect herself and Tahlia. She knew that Leroy was most likely to be violent when he had been drinking so she had decided to avoid him at those times.

At the end of the day Leroy wasn't prepared to make any changes but it was ultimately

very helpful to Sara, to offer him this choice. It helped her be clear about where he stood and she then knew she couldn't continue the relationship with him. I guess all the support she received helped her to get to this point.

I learned that the process of change is not always obvious or visible and can be very private.

*This was incredibly powerful. There was a definiteness, finality and determination in the way she described how she wanted her life to be and what she wanted for her daughter's future.*

Sara moved in with her mum in a different town so that she would be away from Leroy and could finish her studies in hairdressing. She is proud of her growing confidence, strength and independence and the positive impact this has had on her relationship with Tahlia. She is most proud that she is able to be the kind of parent Tahlia needs and to provide the life she wants for her.

As a Koori I never separate myself from my clients. I value the clients who I work with and empathise with their experiences. I always think 'there but for the grace of God go I...' the issues our clients experience are all too often experienced by family and friends when you are Koori.

I think this really helps us to walk in the shoes of our clients respectfully, to understand their experiences. In this case, my colleagues really helped me to plan how I approached the conversation so that I could manage my own anxiety and stay focused on listening respectfully to Sara's experience. This was critical so that Tahlia could live the life her mum wished for her – one free of violence. ●

# Reflection

Michell and Sara were both so brave here. Michell said, 'fear gets caseworkers into bad habits'. How true – fear gets all of us into bad habits. And at quite a few times Michell seems to have taken the more courageous option – to raise the issue at group supervision, to role-play and brainstorm a different approach: practise the conversation, to say no to taking the easy way out: 'being directive and patronising'.

And it sounds like Michell's courage really paid off for everyone: Sara, Tahlia and Michell. Michell describes so honestly how she held her own needs in check while she really – I mean really listened to Sara. What a gift she gave Sara.

But how Sara so deserved a worker like Michell. With her own childhood experiences, and now parenting her lovely daughter who yearned for her when separated, the victim of previous abusive relationships, Sara deserved the very best and bravest intervention we could offer. Sara is also so courageous – she confronted both her need and her fear of Leroy. She told the truth of how she felt, not how she was supposed to feel. She had the courage to ask Leroy to change, and even greater courage to hear his response.

These brave women are both so authentic – I love how Michell tells us how being Koori means that she never separates herself, but on this occasion her separation was helpful and allowed Sara to take the driver's seat.

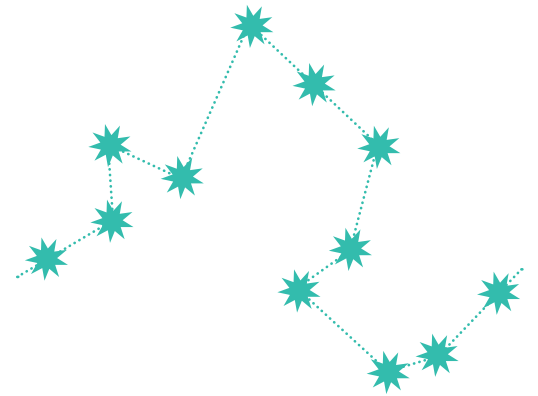
And of course throughout this story is Tahlia, who deserves all the bravery in the world. Thank you Sara and Michell.

Maree Walk, Deputy Secretary Programs and Services Design  
Department of Family and Community Services





Willow, young person.



# Finding home

Madeleine and Francis were the best caseworkers I ever had. They knew when I needed to vent and when I needed to find a solution to an issue. I was still a teenager going through normal teenage stuff on top of everything else. They themselves have a great deal of self-awareness. I think it's important for caseworkers to know their strengths and limitations.

Willow, young person

**T**his story is about Willow who entered care at a young age. A childhood spent in numerous placements impacted her self-confidence, unsurprisingly making her fearful of big changes.

In this story, Willow, now a young consultant with CREATE Foundation describes the experience of moving into a refuge for young people preparing to leave care permanently.

The first time I met Madeleine I was two months away from turning 18. I had lived in 29 placements including foster care, residential care, independently and back home again. I was now about to leave the care system and live in a city I had only known for four months. Needless to say, I was pretty scared.

I clearly remember the day we met – right down to what we were both wearing. I walked up to this giant house (a refuge for young people aged 16-21 years) trembling with anxiety. I was thinking, 'If I stuff up this interview, will I end up on the streets?'

Madeleine opened the door. What I remember so clearly was the big, warm, smile on her face. I thought, 'Hey, maybe I can do this.'

We went through the interview process and two weeks later I was accepted.

I didn't move in straight away. Madeleine and I agreed that for a couple of weeks I would stay at the house on Tuesdays and Thursdays, until I felt more comfortable. This was a pivotal moment as I felt she understood me. She knew the best way to make me feel safe was to slowly introduce me to my new home.

Eventually I completely moved in and got to know the other support staff and young people. The great thing was the shifts were pretty much set – there was a pattern.

I knew who was on what night, what chores I had to do and so on. We did case planning every month, setting out five goals we wanted to achieve and the steps in order to do that.

It wasn't until we were doing the 2011 census that I found out I was technically homeless. I found it ironic as this was the first time I had actually felt like I had a home, a family.

It wasn't all rosy. I was completing my Higher School Certificate at the time. Travelling three hours daily to and from school meant that I would get up early and get home late. But the support staff were always there waiting with a smile, ready to hear about my day.

After I'd been there for a year or so, we found out the refuge was closing due to lack of funding. It was a scary time for me. The staff, however, made sure we were the priority during the changes.

Madeleine found units for us to live in for 18 months through a community housing service. The refuge then became a youth outreach and support service only (with no accommodation).

Around this time, Madeleine was promoted to a senior role and I had to get a new caseworker. Again, I was pretty scared. One of the other staff who worked at the refuge, Francis, became my new caseworker.



Madeleine made sure I knew they were both there for me during this transition. Slowly I developed a stronger connection with Francis.

Madeleine and Francis were the best caseworkers I ever had. They knew when I needed to vent and when we needed to find a solution to an issue. I was still a teenager going through normal teenage stuff on top of everything else.

They themselves have a great deal of self-awareness. I think it's important for caseworkers to know their strengths and limitations. Madeleine is great at advocacy and getting responses from other services. Francis is very nurturing and caring (while maintaining appropriate boundaries) which was something I needed but had infrequently experienced.

It has been almost four years since I first went to the refuge. There is so much they have taught me, from budgeting and study skills to how to cook.

But I feel the most important part of my experience was knowing Madeleine and Francis would always be there for me, even when things were really tough.

*CREATE Foundation is the peak body in Australia that advocates for and represents the voices of children and young people in care. Willow is a young consultant at CREATE Foundation. Willow joined clubCREATE and became involved in the programs that Create Foundation has to offer, which has enabled Willow to share her stories and experiences to help improve the child protection system for others.*



Danielle Schmid, CREATE, with Willow.

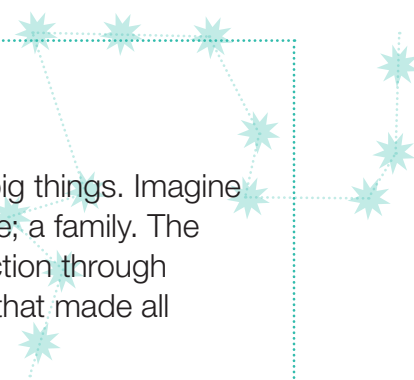


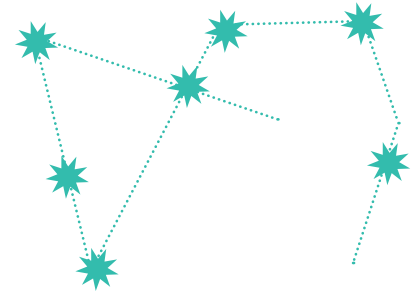
# Reflection

It is often what may seem like little things, which really amount to the big things. Imagine at the age of 17 for the first time in your life you felt like you had a home; a family. The role these caseworkers played helped Willow feel this sense of connection through the provision of safe and stable housing. However it's how they did it, that made all the difference.

Willow's story highlights the importance of being supportive and consistent as a caseworker. For Willow, the genuineness of their support; shown with a warm smile and real understanding of her current situation was what counted.

Danielle Schmid, NSW State Coordinator, CREATE Foundation





# The sounds of home

She didn't know I was visiting that day. As I walked up the stairs I saw her dancing joyfully with the three children to African music – connecting them to their culture in such an authentic way. It was beautiful.

Tari, Caseworker, Settlement Services International

*Settlement Services International is a leading not-for-profit organisation providing a range of services in the areas of humanitarian settlement, accommodation, asylum seeker assistance, foster care and disability support in NSW.*



Tari, caseworker and Jan, carer.



When I used to call mum and dad they hung up on me every time and never returned my messages. They were frightened and didn't trust anyone with authority.

I understood why as their three youngest children, daughters, Amina (eight) and Nadia (six), and son, Heri (four), had been taken into care and they were fearful. Sadly, the children had experienced significant abuse and the Children's Court determined it was not safe for them to live at home anymore.

It was a traumatic time for the parents. Despite the best efforts of FACS, they would not work with their caseworkers to organise a visit with their children. I knew I had to find a way to build a relationship. I had to gain their trust so they could start having contact with their children, even though they couldn't be returned to them.

By sheer coincidence, one day I ran into the family. The dad approached me for a conversation as he could see I was also African. We had a friendly chat and it was only later I revealed I was the caseworker who had tried to ring them so many times.

Thankfully I was able to build on the respect we established at our chance meeting and the parents agreed to discuss how we could work together so they could see their children.

In the beginning, I had to manage a complex dynamic. The fact we were both African was a double-edged sword. While I was able to build a familiar rapport with the parents, it also meant they felt I should be on their side and advocate to have their children returned.

I think we turned a corner when I told them I understood they loved their children very

much and as refugees had brought their children all the way across the world to Australia for a better life.

I explained I was not judging or asking them to go over what had already happened. My job was to make the best of the current situation for the children. This meant a safe home for them to live, but also time with their parents. It was about working to build safe, meaningful parent and child relationships in circumstances that were very foreign for the family.

We spoke for a long time about what we could do to make it comfortable and relaxed for everyone. I suggested sharing a meal. Mum built on this idea and asked for a meeting place with a kitchen so she could cook with her daughters – something she had been missing.

I worked with a local migrant service agency to find a suitable space for the first contact visit. I organised for an interpreter to be present so the parents could ask me and the other workers questions in their first language.

*The visit was emotional, but joyous. It was very moving to see the children run to hug their mum and dad after their time apart. Everybody was crying. I watched Amina and Nadia help their mum cook lunch and then share the meal with their family.*

I was so glad I had persevered with reaching out to the parents. I needed to empathise with their trauma, be non-judgmental, yet completely remain focused on what was best for the children.

I was also working with the children's foster carer and the local African community on a care and cultural plan. It can be difficult to



balance the needs of children entering care. It is important for siblings to stay together, for children to remain close to their birth parents and for them to be placed in a culturally-appropriate home. In this case, all three children could stay together and close to their parents, but despite our best efforts, there were no suitable carers that matched the children's cultural background.

As an Anglo-Australian woman, the carer, Jan, was not overly familiar with African culture. However, she was very keen to do all she could to support the children's needs. I knew I had to be careful not to overwhelm her. She was already doing an amazing job creating a happy and loving home and I didn't want to add more pressure.

*I felt my role was to empower Jan in supporting the children to connect with their culture, without dictating what needed to happen. Together, we worked on how Jan could familiarise herself with areas such as language and customs.*

An issue came up in the first contact visit. Mum was upset that her daughter's hair was in curls and not braided. In African culture, braiding children's hair is very important. African hair grows slowly and is difficult to maintain without braiding and hair oil. Braiding also shows the world your social standing, demonstrating that you are well cared for.

As an African woman, I understood why this was important for mum, but I also knew how difficult it is to learn traditional braiding. I had to get creative. I found videos about braiding on YouTube to show Jan. I bought special hair oil and Jan learnt to braid.



When I visited her home recently, I watched her do Amina's hair and was amazed – it was exactly how I remember my hair being braided when I was in primary school back in Zimbabwe.

Jan can only speak to the children in English, so we had to look for opportunities for the children to speak their first language more than once a month when they saw their mum and dad. It would be devastating for the parents to not be able to talk to their children in their mother-tongue, but for children this young, it's a case of use it or lose it when it comes to language. So we organised an African childcare worker to visit the children

at home each fortnight to read, play games and cook while speaking their first language.

Jan has joined the Australian-African Children's Aid and Support Association, which is a group of families raising African children either through adoption or fostering. The carers share their experiences, while the children socialise with friends from the same cultural background who also live away from their birth families.

Jan often rings me now with ideas for the children's cultural plan. For example, the children went to an African festival recently. They loved trying out beading, painting African flags and traditional arts and crafts.

As in most cultures, food is an important part of African family time, so I have been teaching Jan to cook traditional meals. I source recipes and test them at home so I know I can cook them first. I find ingredients from specialist stores and we cook a meal for the children and eat together. I can see how much the children enjoy these times together.

Jan is just incredible. She is so open to embracing the children's culture and trying new things so they don't lose their heritage. She now sends me links to recipes she has tried or calls to ask for help to find obscure ingredients.

I have found fun ways for the children to engage with their culture such as buying music, films, maps and books from their country to have at home. I will never forget the day I stopped by Jan's home unexpectedly. As I parked my car I could hear the sound of

African drumming coming from the house. I sat in my car and just listened. I had to take a moment because the African music had a real effect on me emotionally – it was the sound of my home as well.

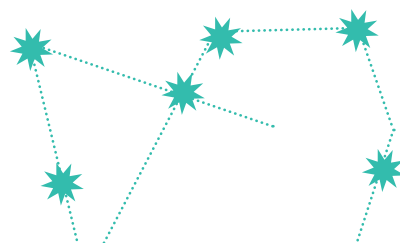
She didn't know I was visiting that day. As I walked up the stairs I saw her dancing joyfully with the three children to African music – connecting them to their culture in such an authentic way. It was beautiful.

*It was a special moment for me as a caseworker as I knew our considered and careful planning, combined with Jan's amazing energy and strength, had paid off.*

My organisation also works with the African community to educate them about child protection in Australia and why certain practices accepted in Africa are illegal here. We want more people in the community to consider foster care. For many, the Australian concept of fostering is unfamiliar and they believe it interferes with another family's private business.

As for Amina, Nadia and Heri, their parents have now made 10 contact visits, as well as extra time in the school holidays. Our relationship with the parents has ups and downs but we work together respectfully. The siblings love seeing their parents who will always be their mum and dad.

They call Jan 'grandma' and when I visit we like to joke that her home looks more African than mine. ●

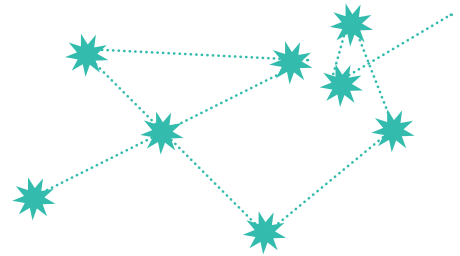


# Reflection

This story honestly made my day, it's so inspiring. It shows great work by both the caseworker Tari and the foster carer Jan, maintaining contact with the parents and taking notice of their wishes, shown so beautifully when the foster carer learnt how to braid the children's hair in an African style. Even where children and carers are not culturally matched, the children can be connected to their heritage where there is the commitment and a good cultural care plan.

Of course being an African caseworker meant Tari had a good understanding of the children's culture, and was perhaps even more passionate in her work for them. This shows the advantages of having multicultural caseworkers and organisations providing foster care. Involving an African child care worker to play with the children to maintain their language was creative casework at its best, making it possible for the children to communicate with their birth family in their future.

Echo Morgan, Manager Multicultural Services, Department of Family and Community Services



# My mum doesn't deserve this

I've purposely used us and we in telling Matt's family story. I suppose it's because I see the department's role as just one spoke in the wheel – this case has really shown me that you never work alone in child protection.

Kate, Caseworker, Department of Family and Community Services





Kate, caseworker.

Matt was only seven when he saw someone shoot his dad.

All of his family were out driving when it happened. He was sitting in the back of the car with his little sister, Stella, and new baby brother, Sam, with mum and dad in the front. His dad survived but for Matt it was one more terrifying thing to be worried about.

It seemed that violence, anger and chaos had been part of his life for as long as he could remember and Matt has a good memory. He clearly recalls his dad hitting his mum when he was just three years old and the time those men busted into their house late in the night yelling and carrying baseball bats. He distinctly remembers how his dad repeatedly threatened to kill them all. And he will never forget the time the family was out driving and his dad drove the car really fast at a tree before pulling away at the last minute.

Matt was a scared and anxious boy. He felt he was the only one who could look after his family. He was also very brave and stood up to his dad regularly, when no one else seemed to care. It was a lot for a little boy, like the time at that party, when he woke up to see his dad hitting his mum.

Matt remembers telling his dad 'My mum doesn't deserve this' before he ran to the shed where there were other men drinking and asked for them to step in, but 'None of them came and helped my mum'.

Matt remembers a lot and is still trying to make sense of it. Why his dad treated his family that way?

When we first became involved with Matt's family, we had a lot of information about them from reports to our Child Protection Helpline.

Including details about mum's childhood and advice from another state where the family used to live.

At our first meeting, Matt, his mum and siblings were staying with Matt's grandma, his mum's mother. They had been living there about a month, having fled their own home because of his dad's violence.

*Through lots of conversations, we learnt the women in this family had always lived with violence. It went back three generations.*

We needed to work with them to change the pattern. It was critical that we supported them now to bring about change. Mum also struggled with a drug habit and other health issues, so the family had a lot on their plate.

One way we did that was by focusing on the children, while assessing the broader risks. It can be hard when you only have adults telling the history. But Matt was always present. In fact, he insisted on being involved in our discussions with the adults. He had seen a lot and he had no trouble telling us about it – sometimes with clearer recall than the adult's memory of events.

Using group supervision from the beginning was incredibly helpful. Having a number of minds think through the issues helped create a starting point for which approach might best work for this family. Importantly, it helped keep our focus on what life must have been like for these children. What was clear, and most worrying, was they didn't seem to have any protective adults in their lives.

After several meetings with mum's family we gained hope. Watching mum and grandma interact with Matt, Stella and Sam, you could

see they loved and really cared about the children and wanted things to be better.

It wasn't easy, and it took a number of meetings with mum before we had a sense she trusted what we were doing. During these meetings mum assured us she was no longer in a relationship with Matt's father.

Then one day we were safety planning with mum and our visit was interrupted by the sound of a car revving its V8 engine at the front of the home. On hearing this sound, mum's demeanour changed instantly. She looked worried and said 'You have to go'. As we were leaving we saw dad sitting in the car. Seeing him there made us worry about the family's safety. We drove away and parked our car further down the road and waited. We saw mum come out of the house and drive away with dad and the two youngest children in the car. It was clear at this point that dad continued to have considerable power and control over mum and the current safety plan was not achievable.

So, we needed to take stronger protective action, which meant getting a warrant to place all three children in foster care. It was an incredibly difficult 24-hours for Matt. He acted out, placing himself, his siblings and the foster carers at risk. Taking him away from his mum and grandma also made him worry about whether they were safe – he needed to be near them.

After consultation with a psychologist Matt was returned to his grandma's care with a strong safety plan in place that grandma would call the police if Matt's dad tried to visit. Matt's younger sister and brother remained in foster care for a while and then we placed them with their aunty.

Shortly after, we met with dad and he no longer seemed the menacing figure we remembered from that afternoon. We were surprised by his calmness. He was charming and eager to do whatever he could to impress. He provided logical responses to our questions and pleaded with us convincingly that he had changed and would do anything to have his children back.

Over the coming months, dad met most of our requests. He went to counselling for violence and anger management. He participated in drug testing and the results indicated he was living drug free. On the face of it, it seemed we couldn't really ask anymore of him.

In one of our earliest talks with Matt, he told us to be wary of his dad. Matt warned us about what he named the beauty cry. He said 'Watch out, he'll do it to you. He does it whenever mum is mad at him and he wants to make things better. He cries and mum forgives him'. In our meetings with Matt's dad he frequently cried. He cried about the loss of his children, the difficulties he'd experienced with their mum, and how she was responsible for the family's troubles. We never doubted his sadness, but Matt's insights were powerful.

*Dad never took responsibility for any of the violence. He refused to see he had any role in the family's difficulties, particularly the violence in the home.*

The more we challenged him, the more he challenged our expertise in making decisions about his family. At times we felt he was grooming us and when that didn't work, he tried subtle forms of intimidation, such as complaining about our work or threatening to take legal action because of what he called our incompetence.



It's interesting when we look back now. Casework training prepares you for this type of behaviour. We had read the research and the practice notes, but he was just so clever in getting under our skins gently – to the point where we started to doubt ourselves and our decisions.

Working with our clinical issues team was so helpful in keeping our eyes open. After a number of consultations we gained the confidence to challenge dad about his inability to take responsibility for the hurt he had caused.

We insisted on supervising the contact visits between dad and his children. This helped us understand the level of fear the children continued to feel about their dad. Working with him was one of the hardest aspects of this case. It was really challenging maintaining a respectful working relationship with dad, knowing what he had done.

We were working to eventually restore all the children to mum's care. Sadly, however, this was not to be. Mum struggled and continues to try and work through substance misuse and other health issues and is now in gaol.

We supported mum through her Criminal Court matters, and presented a letter to the court describing her experiences of trauma to give context to her entrenched drug use and mental health problems. With our support the family have been able to think through mum's situation and explain to the children why mum can't look after them. Mum is only spoken about in a positive and supportive way.

From the start all the agencies, professionals and practitioners involved with the family were committed to working together. Working

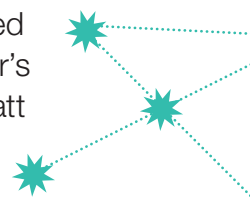
alongside us was NSW Health, Matt's school, our district psychologist, the Clinical Issues Unit and family members. This collaboration was hugely beneficial for this family. Due to the trauma the children had experienced in their lives they were aggressive to each other and adults. They were extremely anxious and hyper-vigilant about everything. We needed a plan that focused on their immediate needs such as predictable routines and surrounding them with people who cared about them. It was like a whole-of-community response and it was great to lead it.

When we first met Matt he was so fearful and anxious that he was unable to go to school. He was not learning and had no friends. On the rare times he did go to school Matt would react violently to simple things that upset him and run away. Matt goes to a small school and his teacher, the principal, and teacher's aid all worked together to support him.

Our psychologist supported Matt, grandma and his teachers, to prepare Matt for school this year. His health workers provided assessments for the school that allowed them to receive extra help. The teacher's aid has been exceptional in helping Matt adjust back to class and to begin to regulate his behaviour.

When we spoke with the school staff not long ago, his teacher's aid described it simply and powerfully when he said 'In a word - happiness, he is now learning and he has friends.'

It was terrific at a recent visit with the family to see Matt play and laugh with his brother and sister, hug his grandma and just be just a kid. When asked how life was, Matt said he



still feels scared about his dad, worries about his mum and grandma, but overall 'Things are lots better'. Matt said he 'Was good, and likes school, loves his grandma and now has friends'. Without prompting Matt added 'I don't understand why he would do it – once we were all out driving and he got us all frapped and my little sister spilled a little bit in the car and my dad went right off. He grabbed all the food and chucked it on the side of the road and drove off. We didn't get to have anything'.

Matt telling this story reminded us that he continues to live with really tough memories

but they have all made such big gains. Matt is adamant he does not want to see his dad at the moment, however he knows that if he wants to see him into the future we will support him and make sure he is safe. It's up to him and that matters. Grandma welcomes our support, not that she needs it, she is doing such an amazing job in helping her grandchildren overcome the effects of trauma.

I've purposely used us and we in telling Matt's family story. I suppose it's because I see the department's role as just one spoke in the wheel – this case has really shown me that you never work alone in child protection. ●

## Reflection

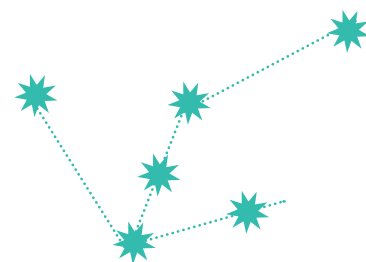
At the sound of the first shot this story reminds us how vulnerable a child's life can be and the incredible courage it takes to change that. Matt showed bravery... but it seemed no one was listening.

I am really impressed by the courage, commitment and capability of our caseworkers. As they became more involved in supporting Matt and his siblings they shared their ideas and thoughts, invested more time, really listened and bravely trusted the voice of others. Especially Matt's often small voice.

The practitioners had information and their initial perspective but it was their deeper engagement with Matt and his family, and other child protection staff, experts and government agencies, which created a more inclusive picture of how to create safety and hope for these children.

We can have a 'whole-of-community response' if we have the courage to create trust. This story shows that.

Sue West, District Director Mid North Coast, Department of Family and Community Services



# I'm all my son has

Troy's threats to call FACS were empty now we were involved in Sandra's life. Sandra saw we were there to help her and Lucas, not judge or split them apart. Sandra's confidence in herself and in us took all the power away from Troy and gave it back to her.

Tracy, Child Protection Caseworker, Department of Family and Community Services



Tracy, caseworker.



Sandra wasn't surprised when we knocked on her door and said we were from FACS. Her ex-boyfriend, Troy, had tried to intimidate her by threatening to call us with false reports about Sandra's parenting. It was his way of bullying her into staying with him, even though he was violent and a heavy drug user.

Troy and Sandra had been together for a few years and had a gorgeous little boy Lucas, who was 18 months old. When I met Sandra and Lucas, Troy wasn't living with them. Sandra had taken an apprehended violence order (AVO) out against him after he gave her a horrible beating.

*My first impression as I watched Sandra and Lucas together was of a mum and bub in love. Sandra was calm and affectionate with Lucas, even with the stress of having us knocking on the door.*

My colleague and I explained to Sandra that we had received a report from the Child Protection Helpline and we needed to make sure she and Lucas were okay. The reporter told the helpline they had seen Lucas in his pram in the front yard alone at 2am. The reporter also said Sandra was growing cannabis in her backyard. It was a serious report given Lucas' age and the time of night. We needed to find out more.

Sandra didn't skip a beat as she talked us through her version of events. She had been at a friend's party the night before and had planned to spend the night. Then a fight broke out between the people at the party and some neighbours. Sandra was scared Lucas could get hurt, so she asked a friend to drop them home in the early hours of the morning. The times matched up with the

report, but Sandra said she had unpacked Lucas, the pram and all their bags before coming inside, and Lucas was not left alone.

Sandra then asked us to come outside and check her yard – she seemed genuinely fearful that there may be marijuana plants. Sandra told us since they broke up, Troy would come to the house and intimidate her. One day he knocked on the back door and said he had scattered marijuana seeds all over the garden and when they grew, he would call the police so she would be in trouble. We later checked with police, who confirmed Sandra had called them weeks before and asked them to check her yard. She was terrified Troy would do something to put her life with Lucas in jeopardy.

Together we went around the garden but didn't see any marijuana plants, so we came back inside to continue talking. Sandra was open with us about her rocky relationship with Troy. She felt torn about having him in her life despite the AVO. Sandra wanted Lucas to have a dad and was grieving the loss of her little family. She was holding onto the happy times she and Troy had in the early days of their relationship. Sandra freely admitted to smoking pot socially but not around Lucas. She didn't think it was a problem or that it affected her ability to be a good mum.

We assessed Lucas as safe but could see Sandra would benefit from some support during this difficult time in her life, so I began to see her once a week.

To be honest I really miss her and Lucas now I don't see them all the time. I'd pop around and we'd sit on the floor and play with bubs together chatting about her life and how she was feeling about being a mum.



Lucas was just gorgeous and it was clear when I saw them together they had a close and loving bond.

I have social work experience, but am new to FACS. I feel lucky to work at one of the original Practice First sites. I love the model and drew on lots of its techniques working with Sandra. I used motivational interviewing, which is a way of prompting discussion with a family about what changes they need to make in their lives. This helped Sandra see how reducing her cannabis use could create positive change in her life.

Many of Sandra's close friends smoked marijuana as well so it was a big part of her social life. We talked about the fact that she was a mum now – what kind of parent did she want to be for Lucas? What sort of home did she want to create as he grew into a boy and one day a man?

Open-ended questions, affirmations and reflective listening worked really well with Sandra. We would talk about what life was like for Lucas now that Troy wasn't there. This helped us explore the positives for Lucas and Sandra could see how he benefitted when she wasn't afraid and stressed all the time.

Troy's emotional and physical abuse had affected her sense of self-worth, so I would help her see all the good decisions she made for Lucas every day.

Reflective listening was particularly useful for me as a caseworker. I wanted to make sure I clearly understood what Sandra said and if I didn't understand, give her time to explain something to me in more detail. Before I left each home visit I would summarise what we'd discussed and the actions we each had to complete before the next time we met.

It was fascinating to see Troy's power over Sandra diminish as she grew in confidence and knowledge. Troy's threats to call FACS were empty now we were involved in Sandra's life. Sandra saw we were there to help her and Lucas, not judge or split them apart. Sandra's confidence in herself and in us took all the power away from Troy and gave it back to her.

Another great leap was when Sandra agreed to see a drug counsellor about her cannabis use. She had gone from minimising her drug use, to realising it wasn't ideal for Lucas, even if he was asleep. Through counselling, Sandra learnt her triggers for using drugs were stress and hanging out with a particular group of friends. She made the brave decision to end a number of her long-term friendships. This was a huge deal because some of these friends were more like a family and had helped Sandra during tough times.

*Sandra recognised this part of her life was over. She chose to put the needs of Lucas above her own.*

We were sitting among Lucas' toys one day and Sandra said to me, 'I'm all my son has now'. I think this was her light bulb moment. It showed me that her counselling and our work together had made her realise she had to change her life to be the best mum she could possibly be. It was around this time Sandra decided that while Troy would always be Lucas' dad, he couldn't be her partner any longer.

Troy was still lurking around the edges and was eventually arrested and jailed for breaching his AVO one too many times. I helped Sandra with the paperwork as part of the Family Law Court proceedings. Sandra

still wants Lucas to know his dad and for them to have a relationship but needs the court's support to facilitate this in a safe way.

During our time together I focused on being available to Sandra and never judging her. One day Sandra told me she had been seeing a new boyfriend. She thought he seemed really nice but was shocked when she found out one of his ex-girlfriend's had taken an AVO out against him. We talked about it a lot and she came to terms with the fact this man had a violent past he had hidden from her. In the end she decided this was not the relationship she or Lucas deserved. I was so happy that Sandra felt comfortable enough to work through this difficult decision with me.

Sandra is a great mum and a strong, capable woman. When I met her she was already on her way to starting a new life and I feel my job was to 'hold her' until she developed the confidence to truly walk away from Troy.

Sandra and I live in a pretty small town so we still run into each other at the shops sometimes – I love seeing her and Lucas, he is such a delight. She isn't scared of FACS anymore and she knows she can always call me if something comes up.

Sandra has started a diploma in welfare so one day she can help other women break free from violence. I think she will do an incredible job. ●

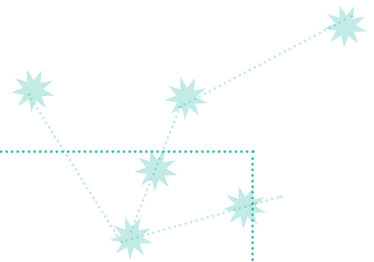
## Reflection

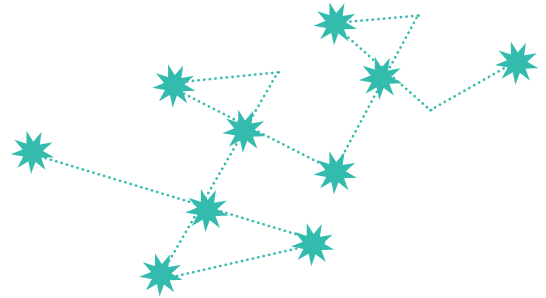
What stood out for me in this story was the wonderful optimism shown by Tracy, the caseworker, and the impact that it had on Sandra. Tracy initiated our intervention from a strengths-based, future-focused and child-centred approach and clearly built an open, honest and trusting relationship with Sandra.

It is imperative that these values are firmly embedded in our work in order for our intervention to have a meaningful impact on the people we are here to help. Through these values Tracy became a strong advocate for Sandra and walked alongside her as Sandra gained confidence and made some difficult relationship decisions, all in the best interests of Lucas.

Sandra's strength and courage was clearly enhanced by Tracy's ability to maintain a child focus, actively listen, follow through on what she said she was going to do, build on the changes made and celebrate the successes and her belief that with the right support, motivation and relationships, people can, and do, change.

Clare Donnellan, District Director South Western Sydney Department of Family and Community Services





# A gift of great value

Gemma would yell and scream and for many practitioners it would have been overwhelming and too hard. Joy, however, was able to empathise and see past this tough exterior. We should never forget that those kids who push and push us away are often the ones who deserve and need our investment and our care more than anyone.

Megan, Manager, Department of Family and Community Services





Megan, manager and Joy, caseworker.

'Do you know you frighten people sometimes?' I asked Gemma as we drove to the crisis refuge. 'Yeah,' she said, 'it helps keep them away from me'.

We had this chat recently – Gemma is now 15 years old. After more than two years of working with her, through lots of anger and sadness, this comment was a breakthrough in our relationship.

Gemma had a horrible start to life living with her mum, Helen, and Helen's boyfriend, Tim. They both had addictions and also suffered from severe mental illness and this contributed to the serious neglect Gemma experienced as a toddler. She had also watched Tim regularly and brutally beat up her mum. Her real dad committed suicide when she was little. It's amazing how smart, creative and strong Gemma is given everything she's been through.

Gemma had a new start in life when she came into care at age five and went to live with her foster carer, Alison, in a happy and loving home. As Gemma hit her teenage years though, the trauma and grief of her early experiences bubbled to the surface. She started taking lots of risks – wagging school, having violent outbursts and running away from home. She started running away from Alison's home to stay with friends or her boyfriend. We also knew she was taking drugs and cutting herself.

Gemma was living with her boyfriend and his father when I took on her case. It took me three visits to get through the front door. Before this she refused to speak to me. I sat on the lounge room floor and listened to her. I had decided that engaging with Gemma was my top priority – if she could feel I was a safe

person to be around it might be the beginning of some trust between us. Gemma agreed I could keep visiting her but she said she might not answer the door every time. If she broke all contact with FACS then she had no-one. She had tried to commit suicide in the past so it was a precarious situation.

Over the next little while, Gemma's drug use increased and she continued to self-harm so we had to intervene for her own safety. We asked for help from the police and asked her boyfriend's father not to encourage Gemma to stay at their house. What came next was intense. There was a siege, with Gemma threatening me and a co-worker with a knife. After several hours of frenzied activity, Gemma was exhausted and had to be taken to hospital in an ambulance for psychiatric assessment.

*Practice First was being introduced to my office around this time. It inspired critical reflection with peers and my managers, Grae and Megan. It gave us permission to acknowledge the importance of my relationship with Gemma above all else, even if it didn't always fit within the normal boundaries of our work. Without a relationship with Gemma we knew we had nothing. Placing her views at the centre of our work, we took every opportunity to listen and learn about who she was and what was important to her.*

It became obvious that Gemma was intelligent and could sense instantly when an adult was patronising her. I needed to be a person of action and not just words. I started out trying to be as useful to Gemma as I could be. I would listen to whatever was on her mind, drive her where she needed to go

and make sure she had all the basics like food and toiletries. I had to take my time, be nurturing without being intrusive and be consistent. I made sure I asked Gemma for her perspective on lots of topics and came to appreciate her expertise in her own life.

*Only Gemma knew the trauma she had experienced and the emotions she felt, so I was mindful to include her thoughts in any important decisions we made.*

Gemma was now living between her mum's house and friends' places. Gaye and Megan courageously backed my unusual request to pay Gemma a weekly allowance. As the 'parents' of young people in care, it's worth remembering that teenagers need money, it's normal. So Gemma would come into the office twice a week to collect her allowance. This not only made sure she had a small amount of money for emergencies, and was not tempted to do anything dangerous to get it, but it gave me the chance to see her. Gemma got to know our office that way as well and little by little our whole team became invested in her care.

Gemma's mental health was unstable – she would fly off the handle at small things lashing out at those around her. We brought in support from specialist doctors from the Alternate Care Clinic.

The clinic is a joint project between FACS and NSW Health that provides services to children and young people in out-of-home care with complex needs. Gemma, Helen and Gemma's foster carer Alison, who was grieving the loss of the foster daughter she loved, all received counselling. Their expertise and guidance has been invaluable in understanding Gemma's health needs and how I can best support her. On a practical

level, we also established safe places Gemma could go to if she found herself in trouble, which included Alison's. Alison told Gemma she could phone her to pick her up from anywhere.

Gemma continued to live between her mum's house and friend's places. Sadly Helen's life with Tim hadn't improved and Gemma found herself looking after them rather than the other way around. Now 14, Gemma could also look at her mum's life with fresh eyes.

It was a big deal when Gemma asked me to help her and Helen get into a refuge so her mum could escape Tim's violence. I was excited when I found them a place together in a women's refuge. They were packed and ready to go when I went to pick them up.

As we pulled away from the curb, Helen started to panic and said 'I can't do this, I can't go' and made me drive her back home. When we got there she jumped out of the car saying, 'I can't leave him, I can't leave him'.

Gemma was left sitting alone in the car, completely gutted. We needed to get away from the house so I drove up the street and parked. Gemma was so angry and disappointed that she threw herself on the side of the road. I sat down next to her. There wasn't anything I could do to make this right.

Her mum was an adult and I couldn't force her to go the refuge. Gemma let off some steam – swearing her head off and kicking things – then got a blanket from my car and told me she was going to sleep there for the night. Seeing her on her own, so young and so hurt, was incredibly sad. I stayed calm, sat with her and waited. This allowed her time to feel and express her pain.



I wasn't sure what would happen next. After a long while, she decided to get back in the car and let me take her to a youth refuge.

*I was so relieved. It again gave me confidence in our trusting, strong relationship - if I stick by her and give her honesty and care, she will make good choices.*

Despite this hurdle we didn't give up on Helen. We believe Gemma's future is bound by how we support her mum. It's about being child-centred and family-focused in our approach. Helen may not be able to care for Gemma in any practical sense or make safe choices for her, but she can give her love which is what Gemma needs. We can do the other stuff but without her mother's love she won't be able to repair emotionally.

We continue to support Helen – it's a social justice issue. She has been hurt and abused most of her life. Each week I take Gemma and Helen to lunch so they can see each other in a safe environment. One day I took Helen to see where Gemma was staying and meet some of the workers at the refuge. Helen loved Gemma's room and this approval was like gold for Gemma. Her face lit up to have her mum interested in her new life.

After more than 10 years together, Helen eventually left Tim and moved into emergency accommodation. I guess I can't know for sure but I believe Gemma's steps to improve her own life empowered Helen to do the same. I like to think our work with Gemma also had a positive flow-on effect for Helen. Gemma is happy her mum isn't living with violence now.

Gemma is still living in supported accommodation. She has begun to

appreciate that her new-found freedom comes with responsibility to make good choices for now and for her future. Gemma has also made steps to reconnect with her former carer Alison who continues to be a positive and caring person in her life.

*Working with young people is magic and being in their company is a privilege. I see my relationship with Gemma as a gift of great value.*

Or, as Gemma says, I may just be an 'old hippie who cares too much'. This might not be a typical story of success and it's certainly a life in progress, but Gemma has gone from refusing to work with FACS to accepting our help and trusting us. She is living in a safe place and we now talk about her going to TAFE to complete her Higher School Certificate as the chaos of her life calms down. She talks about doing something creative at university when she is older and I love hearing her talk about her future with such hope.

### Manager Megan

Joy is amazing. She really gets teenagers and has shifted the way our team thinks about working with adolescents.

Gemma was one of those kids – if we pushed her to work with us, she would push back twice as hard and we would lose any chance of supporting her to make positive changes. Gemma would yell and scream and for many practitioners it would have been overwhelming and too hard. Joy, however, was able to empathise and see past this tough exterior. We should never forget that those kids who push and push us away are often the ones who deserve and need our investment and our care more than anyone.



Practice First allowed us to understand that Joy's relationship-building skills were a lot more important in this case than our statutory powers and my role was to support Joy to hold this risk together.

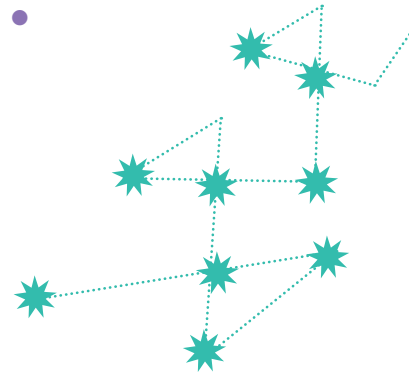
Joy brought this difficult case to group supervision many times and the whole team benefitted from her sharing it. It brought home the importance of building a relationship based on trust especially when a young person is carrying so much hurt and pain. We learnt together and have navigated through this really tough case without buckling under the stress. We have learnt how to be emotionally engaged with a young person but not lose ourselves in the emotional strain. These group discussions helped our office build a community around Gemma so she knew there were people she

could call on if she needed to. Gemma went from being scared of any new relationship to seeking out time with our team and coming to our office to say hello.

I made sure I backed Joy all the way and was there to support her with late night phone calls, or allowing her to try something we'd never done before.

Gemma's successes though are a testament to Joy who just kept plugging away and picking herself up after any setbacks. Joy could find the positive in any situation and promoted Gemma's strengths every step of the way.

In the end I think it was Joy's unconditional care for Gemma that really got through to her and helped her to heal. ●



# Reflection

A number of times in Gemma's story Joy talks about the relationship being the only thing that they had, the only thing that would connect Gemma to the people that could be there for her – when she needed them or when she felt she could ask for help. I get such a clear mental image of this relationship being the thin thread that anchors our young people in care.

Joy talks about the privilege of the relationship. But the skill that Joy showed in being prepared to sit with Gemma's hurt and loneliness on the side of the road is incredibly moving. Just being with Gemma at that moment shows amazing empathy and understanding.

Joy's humility, skill and courage confirms the value of the work we do. She sets an example for us all about the difference that is made when we can use our professional judgment in a supportive system. The permission given by Joy's managers is striking, through support and group supervision Joy was able to do what she knew was needed.

This case also tells a powerful story about Gemma's care experience. Joy's ability to see the experience through Gemma's eyes completely reframes her reputation as the 'most difficult teenager', instead we see the young woman repeatedly hurt and disappointed by those she desperately wants to trust.

There is also a powerful image at the end of the narrative, where we understand that young people in out-of-home care will have a combination of experiences. Joy is known and trusted by Gemma and her mother as their relationship is developing. But I also feel inspired knowing that there was a carer in the background, Alison, ready to be whatever it was that Gemma needed – it is this combined support system that will help create Gemma's positive outcomes.

Simone Walker, Executive Director Safe Home for Life Reform  
Department of Family and Community Services



# Full house

When I started working with the family, not speaking the same language brought up many challenges for communication and establishing trust. However, when you get creative and surround yourself with good people all working towards the same goal, anything is possible.

Rose, Caseworker, Department of Family and Community Services

Raising 12 children would be a challenge for anyone. For Obi and his wife, Sanaa, it was nearly impossible with all the hurdles their big family faced.

They arrived in Australia on a humanitarian visa after spending years in an African refugee camp. Obi has vision impairment and neither of them had ever attended school. They had no family here, couldn't speak English and two of their children had special needs. The children, aged two to 28, were grieving the loss of three other siblings who had died in the refugee camp. To say life in Australia was challenging was an understatement.

FACS had supported the family through its early intervention program, Brighter Futures, as best they could, as had other support services. Despite this, we continued to receive reports to the Child Protection Helpline for serious abuse and neglect, including violence and alcohol misuse.

I started working with the family after their eight youngest children were placed in foster care. My role was to work with them to understand their strengths, find services to help, and determine if the children could return home safely. Although it was traumatic for the family to be separated, the situation at home was too dangerous for us to work through the problems with the children still under their roof.

I was lucky to bring on board an amazing African sessional worker Peter. These sessional workers are African community members who are trained in child protection work and also act as translators.

Peter not only spoke the family's language, but was also a kind and compassionate practitioner. He gave me great insight into the family's culture and even changed

some of our programs to make them more culturally appropriate.

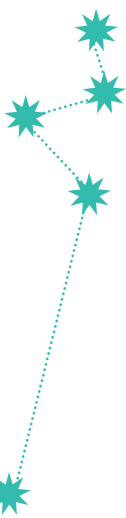
Building rapport with Sanaa and Obi took time. They had strong views on parenting so we had lots of discussions via Peter about the changes they needed to make to ensure the children would be safe when they moved home. We also took on board their views on family life and what was important to them.

I connected the family with specialist services. Catholic Care intensive family based support services worked closely with the family. So did the Child Protection Counselling Service, an occupational therapist, an autism behaviour specialist and the Migrant Resource Centre. The youngest children were connected with childcare and a supported playgroup.

It was a lot of work to coordinate all the services. We had to make sure we were all giving the family consistent advice and focused on the goal of restoring the children to their parents. We held regular teleconferences and meetings, and agreed to share emails among the group. When it came to home visits, we limited the number of people to five at any one time. After all, we were there to help, not intimidate.

Looking back, one of the toughest things was helping the family accept and understand autism. Culturally, they didn't accept that their five-year-old son, Khari, had a medical condition. They were hopeful that once Khari was home, he would learn to talk like all his brothers and sisters.

I worked creatively with the family's therapists to use pictures and slide shows to explain autism via the translator and teach them therapies they could use with Khari during their contact visits.





To help them see the therapy in action, we filmed Khari's teachers using the techniques with him at school. This showed Obi and Sanaa how quickly it helped Khari to calm down when he got upset about something.

*After seeing the footage the family started using picture communication at their next visit which was a big leap forward for us all.*

I also arranged for Obi and Sanaa to take English lessons. My family didn't speak English when I was growing up and I still remember starting kindergarten not understanding what was being said around me. I remember feeling scared and alone and imagined Obi and Sanaa were feeling the same way. It's great to hear them using some English words now.

Working with such a large family was tricky. We organised for the whole family to get together in our office for contact visits, but it just didn't work. The family was big and busy and it was clear they weren't relaxed meeting in an office.

I did a risk assessment on the family's home and we made a decision to have contact there. This was a lot better for everyone but most importantly the kids. The family could connect like a normal family, not in a stale office environment under florescent lighting. We had the same worker supervising the contact each time. This made it predictable for the little ones and the whole family felt more comfortable not having different people in their home all the time.

After lots of ongoing support from all of the services, Sanaa and Obi could see we were all in it for the long haul. We genuinely wanted to help them create a safe home for their children.

It was a long road – I worked with the family for two years. Over this time the parents made the changes needed for them to be a family again.

The time came when the children could return to the family home. The restoration happened gradually starting with the eldest children. We made colourful calendars and countdowns with pictures for each child so they understood they were leaving their foster carers and going home.

During the countdown, the Catholic Care caseworker and I helped the family organise the children's bedrooms. We took the girl's shopping for lovely new bedspreads for their rooms.

*I wanted to give the kids a fresh start with their mum and dad and make the home more cheerful and welcoming when they arrived.*

I also went shopping with the family to buy new school uniforms, shoes and school bags. As Sanaa and Obi had never been to school, they were worried about what they needed to buy. I helped make sure the children got what they needed, without spending too much of the family's limited budget.

It was wonderful to see the family back together under the one roof. There were lots of hugs, kisses and laughter when they returned and I was happy that everyone's hard work had made this possible. Sanaa and Obi thanked me for all my help and this meant a lot to me.

When the children were home, the Catholic Care caseworker and I popped by the house each morning in the first week to give them a hand with breakfast, packing school lunches

and getting everyone out of the door on time. It had been a while since they were all under the same roof and we didn't want a new routine to put stress on the family.

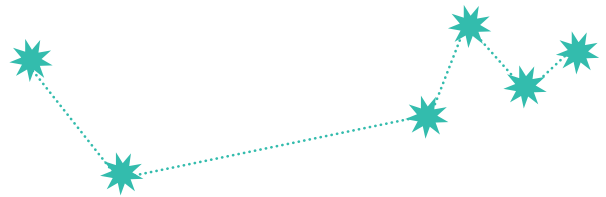
Soon after they were all back together, I found out the children were refusing to eat the traditional African food Sanaa was cooking and she was buying them fast food instead. Sanaa said to me she thought this was what Aussie kids ate and she wanted her children to fit in. They also worried that FACS would think they weren't feeding their children properly. I'm glad they trusted me enough to tell me.

It made me sad to think they thought they had to buy junk food to be good parents. Fortunately, I found out while talking to the staff at the younger children's playgroup,

they were holding sessions on healthy eating. Sanaa and Obi went along and learnt about the healthy eating pyramid and got other good advice. They realised their home cooking was much better for the kids than pizza.

The family is doing well now. Khari is learning to talk thanks to Sanaa and Obi's new parenting skills, support from his health professionals and of course the love of all his brothers and sisters.

When I started working with the family, not speaking the same language brought up many challenges in terms of communication and establishing trust. However, when you get creative and surround yourself with good people all working towards the same goal, anything is possible. ●



# Reflection

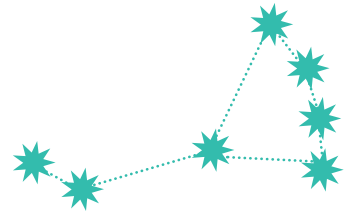
While we might not all speak the same language, the language of child safety and care for families is universal and is so wonderfully demonstrated in this story. I think there was an understatement in the story though when Rose said that 'Working with such a large family was tricky' but what was so evident was, that even though the situation was complex and the family structure and concerns were numerous, there was little sense of the worker being overwhelmed. In practice, we can often feel overwhelmed by the plight of our clients, by the enormous issues facing them and the difficult decisions we may have to make. For this situation though, Rose broke down what needed to be done and built a sense of mastery and achievement in the family over time.

This story illustrates so many practice highlights for me:

- focusing on safety and not being afraid to make difficult decisions or having important conversations when needed
- listening well
- working with others to help support the family
- developing positive relationships
- understanding culture and being proactive about what that means
- being consistent and being someone the family can trust
- persevering.

There was certainly a strong sense of hopefulness right from the start which gave the family and others working with them hope for a better future. It might have been a full house to start with but I reckon it's a fuller home now.

Dr Sandra Heriot, Director Child Protection, Department of Family and Community Services



# Bridge over troubled water

By working together, Rosie's Place and FACS supported Jenny to be safe and improve her overall wellbeing, in order to protect her children. You can't separate the safety of a mum from her children. This is why the collaborative approach brought about real change for the whole family.

Cathy, Manager, Rosie's Place

*Rosie's Place is a community based sexual assault and family violence counselling service for children, young people and their non-offending family members. It provides support groups, counselling, and trauma recovery services throughout Western and South Western Sydney.*





Welcome sign at Rosie's Place.

When I first met Jenny and her four children she had just joined a support group at my organisation, Rosie's Place. The family began counselling to help them deal with trauma borne out of years of domestic violence. The tipping point came when Jenny's husband, Geoff, was charged and given an AVO after a horrible beating he gave Jenny in front of the children. The oldest daughter tried to stop him and he pushed her hard against the wall.

FACS caseworkers met with Jenny and together they agreed she would not allow Geoff in the home when the children were there. The caseworkers explained that if Geoff was in the home, it was possible her children would need to be taken into care to keep them safe from his violence. FACS connected Jenny to us so we could support her through this tough time with counselling and help her understand her husband's behaviour and the impact years of violence had on her family.

*Jenny was determined to stick to the orders - she loves her children and her greatest fear was she would lose them.*

Despite the AVO, Geoff rang and sent her texts constantly. He would leave things on Jenny's front door – messages, parcels of groceries and toys for the children. Geoff would come over when the kids were at school, initially saying he had to pick things up but then extending his stay by fixing things around the house. During those visits Geoff would tell Jenny about how much he missed her and his children and how he had really changed.

We were supporting Jenny at the time but she didn't tell anyone about his visits. She

kept hoping Geoff would get the hint that she wanted to end their relationship and he'd leave her alone. As time went on though, he came around more and more. Jenny told me later she felt she had some control, as Geoff would only come when the children were at school and they never saw him.

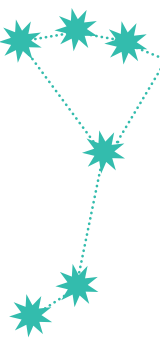
One afternoon that all changed. Geoff was over and had settled in to watch television when the children were due home. Jenny asked him to leave. He wouldn't, saying he just wanted to say hello, and promised to leave as soon as he saw them.

The kids were surprised when they came home to see their dad. The youngest two in particular seemed glad. Jenny's 12-year-old daughter retreated to her bedroom while her oldest son said he was going to see a friend and left.

Jenny was starting to realise that Geoff's old ways were re-emerging. He would make promises but eventually break them, raise his voice to intimidate her and not care how other people were feeling as long as he was comfortable. He acted as though everything was normal despite the years of abuse she and the children had experienced.

A few nights later there was a knock at the door. Geoff had arrived with take-away food, a DVD for the kids and chocolates for Jenny. He said he had come for tea. Jenny sat through the meal while Geoff talked about how much he missed them, how he really had changed his ways and that he just wanted to come home. Geoff told Jenny he knew they had both made a lot of mistakes but he wanted to forget the past and be a family again. Jenny waited till the children had gone to bed and asked him to leave.





Geoff sat back, grinned at her and said, 'Make me'.

Jenny said she would ring the police if he didn't leave. Geoff argued that because she had let him into the home with the children there, FACS may take the kids. He offered her a deal, 'Let me stay the night and I'll leave tomorrow and never come back'.

The next day Jenny brought the two younger children to our group meeting. Visibly distressed, she asked to speak to one of the counsellors. She broke down in tears saying she was in a real mess.

The counsellor said she had to report what had happened but would first speak to the FACS caseworker. Jenny pleaded for this not to happen, fearing her children would be removed. Jenny said it had been made clear to her she had to keep the children safe – and she felt she had let them down.

Even though the children hadn't said anything about their dad being home, Jenny knew they were unsettled and worried, particularly the oldest two.

The counsellor spoke with Jenny and helped her realise how Geoff had once again trapped her. She was in a situation that she couldn't escape unless she broke his rules and her silence. Jenny had to speak out and overcome his emotional blackmail to release his hold over her. This was her chance to change the rules. It meant taking a leap of faith in those who had been supporting her and her children.

The counsellor rang the caseworker who was supportive of Jenny, acknowledged her honesty and reassured her she would be supported to care for her children. They also spoke to Geoff who denied being at the

house and said Jenny made it up to make him look bad.

Following this crisis, things did change. Most importantly, Jenny's thoughts about the system shifted from feeling watched to feeling supported. She could have difficult conversations with the caseworker without fear of judgement or retribution and she felt her honesty was valued.

*Jenny said 'I feel I can have my own point of view and people will listen and my role as a mum is validated'.*

By working together, Rosie's Place and FACS supported Jenny to be safe and improve her overall wellbeing, in order to protect her children. You can't separate the safety of a mum from her children. This is why the collaborative approach brought about real change for the whole family.

Jenny's arrival at our service almost 18 months earlier was not the start of change but just one step in her path to leaving domestic violence. She didn't arrive by accident – by seeking information about what her family was experiencing, she chose to break free from the violence. As well as attending the support group, she had counselling to deal with the impact of so many years of violence-induced trauma. This helped her understand that her sense of being crazy was the result of years of ongoing emotional and physical abuse.

Most importantly Jenny also discovered that the violence in her home was impacting her children. She realised it wasn't her fault. Jenny knew that trying to manage the violence had drained her emotionally, socially, economically and, most importantly, taken

away her sense of who she was as a woman, wife and mother. Coming to Rosie's Place was timely for Jenny but only because it was her time for change.

Jenny and her children continue to heal and grow together. They've made a fresh start by moving to a new home and Jenny is now working part-time. The children have resumed some contact with their dad. Jenny also speaks to him occasionally but their conversations centre on their children and not on their relationship.

Jenny says she will never forget the day she opened up about what had been happening. If she had lost her children, even for a time, she believes she would have also stayed with Geoff because there would have been nothing else for her.

Now she sees she has so much more. With our support and counselling Jenny has reclaimed her safety, wellbeing and strength. She says her children get so much more from her and are achieving so much more for themselves. ●

## Reflection

How inspiring to hear of the positive outcome for Jenny and her children after many years of living with domestic violence. Jenny had felt trapped in her situation. She loved her children and her biggest fear was that she would lose them. Jenny had no real sense of who she was as a woman, partner or mother.

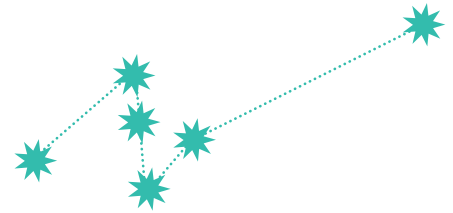
With the help of her caseworker Jenny soon learnt to recognise the impact of the violence on her children. Jenny's trust in 'the system' shifted from one of feeling watched to feeling supported. Jenny had a strong relationship with her worker and was able to talk honestly, knowing she would not be judged. Jenny felt her honesty was valued. Jenny knew it was time for change and the workers were there ready to support her wholeheartedly with the many issues she was facing, some of which included: housing, counselling and domestic violence education.

The story highlights the importance of building strong relationships with our clients and building on their strengths. The collaborative approach by Rosie's Place and FACS was critical in achieving this outcome and brought about real change for Jenny and her children. After 18 months Jenny has the knowledge and skills to manage her life, she has a strong positive relationship with her children. The family now live in a safe, secure and stable home environment free from violence and have been given the support to recover and to heal from the many years of violence they endured.

Well done Rosie's Place and FACS.

Helena Carty, Caseworker, Family Violence Service, Department of Family and Community Services





# On his own two feet

Nathan and I keep in contact via text messages, emails and Facebook a lot. It's important to talk to adolescents in a way they feel comfortable.

Kylie, Out-of-Home Care Caseworker, Department of Family and Community Services

When I started working with Nathan, my first job was to find him. He had decided to spend some time with his mum and they were couch-surfing from house to house in the central west of NSW.

*I don't know how we managed before the internet, but using Facebook and email I was able to make contact and make sure he was safe.*

Nathan had been in out-of-home care since he was eight and had thrived under the guidance of a loving Aboriginal foster family. Then, when he was 17, his mum visited and turned his life upside-down, convincing him they should be together. Nathan was protective and very devoted to his mum, and almost an adult, had very strong ideas about where he wanted to live. When his mum told Nathan she needed his help, it was a big call, but he made the decision to go with her.

Working with adolescents is tough. My main goal in the beginning was simply to talk to Nathan and make sure he knew I was there to help. He knew that we wanted him to return home but he needed time to be with his mum. After two months away I got a call from him out of the blue – he was in Dubbo, stranded and alone.

He told me he'd had a big fight with his mum and she didn't want him around anymore, so I jumped in the car straight away and drove two hours to pick him up.

Nathan didn't say a lot on the drive home but I knew he was upset about what had happened. He told me he missed his friends and wanted to go back to school to start Year 12 and try living on his own for a while. Even though living alone wasn't my first

choice for Nathan, I knew that if I was going to have a relationship with him, I needed to be flexible and willing to compromise. I also took the view that for Nathan living independently would be more stable than being transient with his mum and at least this way I could support him to be safe.

I worked with Nathan to find him a safe place to live and organised an allowance from Centrelink to cover his housing and school costs. I taught him how to budget his income so he could balance rent, food and petrol and I linked him to The Salvation Army's Food Bank which provides fresh and healthy food for a small cost. This was a great find as it meant he would have plenty of healthy food to feed his teenage appetite.

Each step of the way, I listened to Nathan's views and included him on all decisions so he felt a sense of control. I was really happy when Nathan reconnected with his former carers. He still goes round there for family dinners all the time. Nathan's carers are a link to the local Aboriginal community which is very important to him. One of the great things about living in a small town for so many years is that Nathan had developed strong connections with friends, relatives and the Aboriginal community who always look out for him and have his best interests at heart.

*Nathan was so excited to go back to school and within a month he emailed me to tell me that he had been voted school captain.*

I was so proud of him. He is a natural leader, respected by his friends and I was thrilled he was chosen for this important role. I

organised a special letter of congratulations to be sent to him from FACS.

Nathan and I keep in contact via text messages, emails and Facebook a lot. It's important to talk to adolescents in a way they feel comfortable. I meet up with Nathan pretty regularly, but it's great to be able to keep in touch these other ways to make sure everything is okay. I know he trusts me and he knows he can call me any time to ask for help. I also hope he knows how much I care and want the best for him.

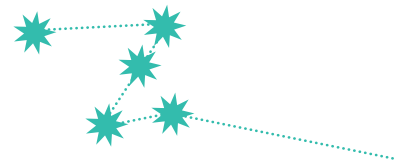
Nathan is a smart, kind and respectful young Aboriginal Wiradjuri man. I have never heard him say a bad word about his mum even after all she has put him through over the years. I have big hopes for his future and know that he has the strength and motivation to make a great life for himself.

The loveliest thing about Nathan is that he doesn't think he is special, he is so modest and doesn't realise the enormity of his success.

What amazes me about Nathan is how he takes all the opportunities that come his way. He is involved in everything from a travelling Aboriginal dance group, through to public speaking roles and even recently meeting Quentin Bryce the then Governor-General. Nathan grabs onto life with both hands.

We are now working on his leaving care plan – something we do with all young people preparing to leave, or who have already left, out-of-home care. This is so when Nathan reaches 18 he has a road map for what he wants to do and how he can get help when he needs it. When we sit in the car driving together we have a good chat. He recently told me that when he finishes year 12 he wants to be a train driver on the railway that runs through the outback. I am sure he will fulfil his dream.

When I showed Nathan this story he said to me 'I want to use my real name'. I think that's a wonderful reaction. It shows he is proud of his achievements and wants the world to know who he is. ●



# Reflection

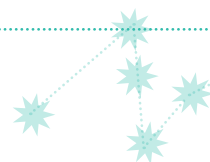
There are achievements all through this story from supporting Nathan to maintain his cultural identity, promoting personal choice, understanding his personal needs and challenges and encouraging him to make informed decisions in the absence of judgments. Notably, the personal achievements of Nathan cannot go unrecognised – what tremendous successes he has experienced.

The importance of valuing the views and hearing the voices of the young people we work with, as they approach young adulthood, is immeasurable. The relationship between Nathan and his caseworker was founded on this key element of good practice.

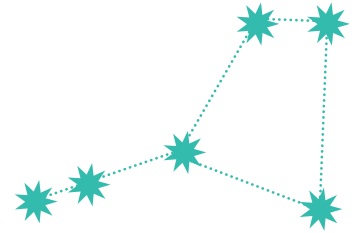
It is the application of a strengths-based approach to engaging young people, listening to them, helping to guide them in a direction that will be conducive to their needs, and understanding what is of importance to them, that paves the way for great outcomes.

The respectful nature that Kylie assumed with Nathan was clearly reciprocated, and it is this approach to casework that demonstrates the importance of working in partnership with young people to afford them every opportunity to grow, learn and embrace life. This story is an example of the fantastic work we do and the commitment of staff to improving the lives of those we work with.

Leonie Booth, Director Practice Standards, South Western Sydney District  
Department of Family and Community Services







# Reunion

In post adoption work it is so important to take the time to genuinely engage with families from the very first contact you have with them. Respect and trust can't be built overnight, it takes time.

Sonali, Caseworker, Adoption Information Unit, Department of Family and Community Services



Sonali, caseworker.

Robert's story was not uncommon to us in the Adoption Unit. Now aged 58, he was separated from his birth family in 1956 at a time in Australian society when forced adoption happened regularly. The adoption was kept a family secret for decades until his birth mother, Margot, was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Realising she only had months to live, Margot wanted to connect with her son.

*It was during this traumatic time for the family that Margot told her daughters, Grace and Amy, that she and their father, Paul, had placed a baby boy - their full biological brother - for adoption five decades earlier.*

Margot and Paul were young, unmarried and from different cultural backgrounds. Their parents did not approve of their mixed-race relationship and when Margot became pregnant their families gave them no options. Being so young, disempowered and without any other support they relented and placed their first-born son for adoption. A decision that impacted on every day that followed for Margot and Paul.

Grace shared with me the flood of varied emotions she felt at this revelation. She described a sense of sadness at all the years lost, empathy for her parents who were in so much pain and shock they had kept the secret for so long. Grace being Grace, as I would come to know her later, also expressed grief for her brother who had been denied this ready-made family for so many years. She is the sort of person who focuses on others and how they feel, as much as her own feelings.

With her mum's health ailing, Grace became the family's advocate and began a journey to

find her brother and hopefully reconnect him with her mum before she died. Her first step was to contact us at the Adoption Information Unit.

She spoke with the caseworker on duty who gave her the time and space to talk through her story. Grace's greatest fear was that her brother had already died and it was too late to find him.

I began working with Grace as her caseworker after the family made the decision to formally start the process of reunion. Given Margot was running out of time, we pulled out all stops to speed up the application process and help work through paperwork in compliance with adoption legislation.

During my first conversation with Grace I allowed her the space to share her story in her own time. The approach paid off. After that she would often call to talk and I allowed her to move at her own pace through her emotions and be the best support I could be.

*In post adoption work it is so important to take the time to genuinely engage with families from the very first contact you have with them. Respect and trust can't be built overnight, it takes time.*

As a part of the process, I helped Grace prepare for a range of possible outcomes. Her brother may not know he was adopted or want to reunite with the family. He could be angry or, as she feared, he may not be alive.

The next step was to invite Grace to prepare a first letter. This letter allows the searcher to reality-test their readiness and prepare emotionally for the complex journey to



reunion. For the person being found, this letter from the birth family offers context and information to help them come to terms with being found. I suggested she write about her current life, motivation for the reunion and hopes for the ongoing relationship.

In the end, Grace found Robert on Google but we needed to make sure it was definitely her brother, so we sent him a registered letter. At this point we still didn't know if Robert even knew he was adopted. If he did know, how would he feel about being found? I needed to prepare Grace for whatever Robert's reaction may be.

Fortunately, Robert was at the right time in his life to meet his birth family. He had recently retired and was living a quiet life in country NSW. His adoptive father had died and his adoptive mother was elderly. Robert had recently recovered from a near fatal illness. He didn't share a strong sense of belonging with his adoptive family and was incredibly excited to discover he had parents and two sisters living in the same state.

He couldn't wait to read the letter from his sister, Grace, who had written a beautiful, honest and open-hearted letter welcoming him to their family. Crucially, she left it up to him to decide if he wanted to make contact. Thankfully for everyone he did and Grace and Robert shared a beautiful reunion at his home, four hours away from where Grace lived. Grace shared with me what it meant for her to see and hold her brother for the first time. She could not believe how much he reminded her of their father.

I wasn't there when Robert was reunited with his sister or his mum at her bedside in palliative care, but Grace shared with me that it was deeply moving. He went on to spend a week in his parent's home with his dad, Paul, getting to know each other in their own time and visiting his mother in hospital each day.

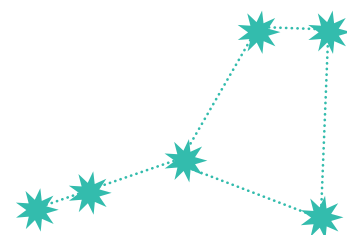
The family is now taking their time to get to know one another and catch up on all the years lost, including connecting with cousins, aunties and uncles. At the time of writing Margot is still battling cancer, blessed with a little more time to spend with Robert.

All three siblings came to visit me here in Sydney and it was amazing to see them together. Physically they looked so similar – there was no denying they were siblings.

*I can only imagine what it must have been like for them to see themselves mirrored in each other's faces. To see such strong similarities in their mannerisms after almost 60 years apart was incredible.*

Robert has taken on the surname of his birth family as part of the process of reclaiming his sense of identity.

I am aware that families begin a complex journey post-reunion – newly found relationships have to be negotiated and defined. I am hopeful that the rapport I established with Grace and Robert will mean they will call for support as they need. ●





# Reflection

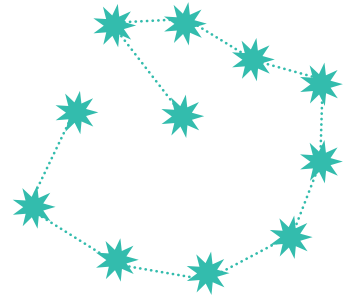
This is a lovely story which led to a great outcome for this family.

The caseworker provided patient support and guided the family to progress to a successful face-to-face meeting. This step-by-step work is necessary to help prepare the family to meet and it needs to progress at the pace required by the family.

This story illustrates why open adoption and birth family contact is included in the Safe Home for Life child protection reforms. Research indicates that understanding birth family circumstances at the time of the adopted person's birth and providing opportunities for contact throughout their lives is beneficial in successful adoption.

Myra Craig, Executive Director Statewide Services, Department of Family and Community Services





# That extra mile

I spent many hours each week visiting and talking to the house parents over the phone. This frequent contact was crucial to support Delphi look after the children. They kept me up-to-date with what was happening, the challenges they faced and also the children's healing, it felt like I almost lived in the home.

Azure, Child Protection Caseworker, Department of Family and Community Services

This is a story about team work. A report about serious safety concerns for a family group of 11 kids under the age of 11 is a daunting prospect. It was a blended family; some were dad's kids, some were mum's and others were theirs together. It was never going to be easy, but by sharing the risk and focusing on the needs of the children we have had a great outcome.

This story is told by the caseworker, Azure, and the manager casework, Jim.

**Azure:** This case came to us after a long history in a number of states. The family had been involved with numerous child protection agencies and had moved around a lot to avoid them.

**Jim:** There were reports about neglect, domestic violence and worries about physical abuse. What brought it to a head was when one of the little boys nearly hanged himself by accident on a makeshift swing dad had set up from the back tree. Fortunately he came out of that okay, but it was a real near-death experience, and it wasn't the first incident in their history of really serious neglect.

This case coincided with the Practice First service delivery model coming to our team and we first started to review it through our group supervision sessions.

**Azure:** For me, it was great to be able to bring such a complex case to group supervision and have the support of my colleagues. It was really challenging working out the right way to approach this case, so we would bring it back to the group to discuss.

The family weren't at all interested in working with us and kept saying everything was fine.

Dad was particularly difficult to engage and would get angry if we talked about our concerns. He had a child protection history himself and a very negative view of us.

**Jim:** While they didn't want to talk about things going on within the home, they recognised that many of their kids had problems, including with speech and they were happy to discuss those. We came up with a plan to visit and talk about each child individually, find out what their needs were and see if we could help in any way. This opened the door for them to engage with us, to see us as helpers and not just investigators.

**Azure:** This breakthrough allowed me to visit the family regularly over a period of time. During this time, we were also getting more information from other states and the children's school that showed an undeniable pattern of neglect.

**Jim:** We continued to take this case to group supervision and eventually decided with the support of our team that we needed to take the kids into care. That same day, we received a report that one of the youngest children had been rushed to hospital, having ingested some of dad's medication. This demonstrated that the issues that got us involved with this family in the first place were still present. We had tried hard with this family but decided the risks were too high.

*We had never removed 11 children before, and it took many resources and an entire team of caseworkers. In hindsight, we should probably have taken even more, one for each child.*

**Azure:** There was a close bond between the children so we really wanted to keep them

together as much as possible. Especially for the eldest boy, who was taking care of his younger siblings and felt responsible for them. If they were separated, it would almost feel like a removal from him as well.

**Jim:** We sought support from Delphi, one of our local partner organisations, even though they were primarily a disability service. Delphi set up a house so all of the kids could stay together. They organised two experienced ‘house parents’ and all of the wrap-around support services that were needed to support the children.

**Azure:** I developed a strong relationship with the house parents who took on the massive task of getting to know and care for each of the children individually. I spent many hours each week visiting and talking to the house parents over the phone. This frequent contact was crucial to support Delphi look after the children. They kept me up-to-date with what was happening, the challenges they faced and also the children’s healing, it felt like I almost lived in the home. I was able to share information with them too, helping them understand the children’s previous experiences and home life. Together, we were advocates for achieving the best outcomes possible for the kids.

**Jim:** When the children were removed, the six or seven who were school-aged also changed schools. The new school was great, providing all the services and resources they could and establishing education plans for each child. The progress the children made at school was incredible.

At the same time, we wanted the best long-term solution for the kids. They needed a primary carer to meet their emotional needs

– the current placement couldn’t provide that. Unfortunately, finding one placement to take all 11 children was not possible. As hard as it was to split them up, we focused on limiting the negatives and aimed to give them the best of both worlds – a family life where each child would get the time and attention they deserved, but also could continue to grow up together as brothers and sisters. The local community organisation Life Without Barriers (LWB) came on board and we agreed on three sets of carers, which includes the house parents, who all lived in the same area. These carers completed reparative parenting training, which helps traumatised children develop secure attachment relationships, and started to form a relationship with one another to support sibling contact.

**Azure:** LWB were fantastic. They did everything we could have wanted them to do, and they really understood the significance of the sibling relationship for the kids.

**Jim:** LWB and Azure worked really closely to make the transition as smooth as possible. LWB provided a caseworker and together they sat down with the children to get to know them. They made sure the kids felt involved and kept up-to-date on what was happening.

*The LWB caseworker made books for each child, reflecting their interests and personality, to inform them about the transition process and prepare them for the move. It went off without a hitch.*

**Azure:** When final orders, the court’s determination of where the children would live permanently, came through for the family, I went out to tell the kids who would stay in



their placements. They took it so well they actually cheered. Two were restored to family interstate, and while it's sad they were moving away from their siblings, they were excited to reconnect with their biological dad, who is working on building a relationship with the foster carers so all the kids can keep in touch.

**Jim:** I think Azure did an amazing job with these kids. She worked hard to get to know them all and be their advocate. That can be extended to everyone involved – it was a real team effort and the case probably touched all of the caseworkers in the office at one point or another.

Although these children had to come into care, mum is now working with us to support

positive contact. She actually thanked us the other day, saying she can understand why we made the decisions we did.

**Azure:** I remember a few weeks after they came into care, I visited and noticed the six-year-old boy just staring at me. When I asked him what was wrong, he said 'Azure, you don't look like the welfare'. They had always been told awful stuff about us and not to talk to us. He had this idea we were horrible and evil and was realising it wasn't true. While the siblings were all close, they resolved their differences by fighting because that's what they had been shown. Now they aren't fighting as much – they're smiley, happy, healthy kids and it's awesome. •

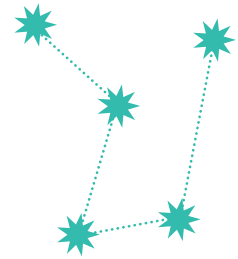
## Reflection

Wow, what this case highlights is that no child protection intervention is the same, ever easy or straight forward. What struck me about this case was the absolute dedication and tenaciousness of the caseworker, Azure. At no time did she or other staff involved lose the focus of the children and they actively engaged them in every decision that needed to be made. This included being solution-focused, positive, creative and dedicated on each child's individual needs as well as the parents and other stakeholders.

As the situation changed or new information came to hand it was carefully considered in the context of the best interests of the children. While children should reside with their parents or family where it is safe to do so, sometimes the safest option is for children to be placed in out-of-home care. For these children to provide positive feedback about staying in care was quite remarkable and a testament to the time and energy Azure spent building and maintaining relationships with the children.

Caseworkers make differences to children's lives every day and this case is just one example of the important work we all do day in day out. Well done to Azure and Jim – their work will have positive and lasting impacts for this family.

Simone Czech, Acting Executive Director Out-of-Home Care  
Department of Family and Community Services



# Baby steps

At one stage Cathy said to me, ‘I don’t know what I would have done without the plan’. It really helped her gradually learn about being a mum without feeling overwhelmed by trying to master everything in one go.

Sarah, Caseworker, Department of Family and Community Services



Sarah, caseworker.



The first time I met Cathy, I was supervising her final drug-test. We had to be sure she wasn't using drugs. The test confirmed Cathy was clean – she had been working to maintain a drug-free lifestyle for more than two years. Cathy had been getting professional help with her drug use, mental health and parenting skills in the hope her two-year-old son, Thomas, could be returned to her care.

When Thomas was born, the doctors found methamphetamines in his system because Cathy used ice during her pregnancy. At that time, knowing what an addictive substance ice is, the risk of Thomas being harmed or neglected was too high to leave him in her care. Cathy's mum, Rose, stepped in to care for baby Thomas. Thanks to Rose's love and commitment he is growing up to be a clever, healthy and lovely little boy. She went above and beyond to create a safe home for Thomas to live.

*During the time away from her son, Cathy dedicated herself 100 per cent to rehabilitation, counselling, psychiatric support and attending parenting groups.*

Two years later, and with the backing of FACS, the Children's Court determined that Thomas could be restored back to her care. It was now my role as the caseworker to reunite them safely and to support Cathy to be Thomas' mum.

I spent a long time preparing a restoration plan. Cathy had already taken such brave steps and now needed support and strategies for her to succeed. I worked closely with two FACS psychologists to write the plan and they encouraged me to consider the grief and loss Thomas may experience when his primary carer changed from grandma to mum. I also

consulted with Thomas' carers at daycare to help me monitor his progress and asked them to contact me at any time if Thomas began acting differently or if they had any concerns about his care.

Because of his age and attachment to Rose, Thomas was at a vulnerable time for such a dramatic change in his home life. He loves his grandma dearly and she was the only parent he knew. We planned for Cathy to move back to the family home with her mum and Thomas. I wanted to give Thomas time to build a positive relationship with his mum while she gradually took on parenting responsibilities in an environment he felt safe.

One of the balancing acts was helping Rose accept she had to gradually let go of caring for her grandson so her daughter could learn how to be a parent. Most first-time parents learn over time, through trial and error, how to care for their baby.

From feeding, bath time, play and routines, there is much to learn. Cathy had completely missed out on all these experiences and suddenly found herself with a walking, talking, clever, little toddler.

My plan was to take things slow and steady, giving Cathy parenting tasks at the same time as helping Rose step back. In the first two months of the restoration plan, Cathy would play in the house and backyard with Thomas, change his nappies and give him snacks. From two to four months into the plan, Cathy would get him up in the morning, clean his teeth, get him dressed for the day, read him stories, bath him and prepare all his meals.

This continued for a whole year, with incremental steps taken every few months. The plan was very detailed. It helped Cathy



know exactly what she needed to master within a particular timeframe, which I could then monitor during home visits and chats on the phone.

At one stage Cathy said to me, 'I don't know what I would have done without the plan'. It really helped her gradually learn about being a mum without feeling overwhelmed by trying to learn everything in one go.

Each month I visited the family, I could see the attachment between Thomas and his mum growing stronger as they got to know one another. It was clear the home was a safe, loving and stable one and I could see Thomas approach his mum more and more when he needed something or a cuddle.

I always made sure the three members of the family were home when I visited. I took the time to chat with Thomas and observe him in the home to see how he was managing the new arrangements. It was useful to talk to both Cathy and Rose about how it was going and any issues that may have come up since we last spoke.

A major part of my support that year was navigating the relationship between Rose and Cathy, who had their ups and downs. Part of this was helping them understand their different styles of parenting. Rose was born in Hong Kong and Cathy in Australia. The cultural and generational differences meant they didn't always see eye-to-eye on things like housework or meals. I remember helping them work through the fact that Rose would prepare a traditional Chinese meal for Thomas' breakfast while Cathy would make toast. I had to help Rose understand that although Cathy had a more relaxed approach to parenting, it didn't mean Thomas wasn't cared for.

I encouraged Rose to role-model good parenting to Cathy, especially when Cathy was doing something for the first time. When Cathy had to take Thomas to the doctor I encouraged Rose to go along to help Cathy with the sorts of questions to ask the doctor. I also connected Cathy and Rose to Relationships Australia to help with their communication, so they could work through issues in their own relationship which had come to the surface as a result of living in such close quarters.

Rose said she felt ashamed of Cathy's past and the family's involvement with FACS. She identified their Chinese heritage as fuelling these feelings. Rose could be critical of her daughter because of Cathy's past. I made a point of regularly talking to Rose about all of Cathy's amazing achievements, strengths and determination in overcoming her drug addiction.

*By drawing on strengths-based practice and focusing on Cathy's positive attributes, it reminded Rose of Cathy's progress and all the reasons to feel proud of her.*

Cathy continued to become more confident and more competent. After the year-long transition plan, Cathy and Thomas took the big step of moving out to set up their own home with Cathy's long term-partner Michael. They took up my suggestion to attend a Triple P parenting course together. Cathy is like a sponge. I watched as she used techniques she had learnt with Thomas, such as using the feelings face-chart so he could express how he was feeling, as well as making sure Thomas and her have one-on-one time which she calls 'chat time'. Cathy wanted to create a dedicated time in the day when Thomas could talk to her about

anything he wanted without interference from chores or television.

Cathy and Michael recently got married. Michael is a wonderful male role-model for Thomas, particularly important as Thomas' birth dad is not in his life right now. Thomas still visits his grandma every week and they continue to have a close relationship.

I feel lucky to be Thomas' caseworker and to have gotten to know Cathy. She is definitely the most motivated parent I've worked with in my years as a caseworker.

This restoration needs to be credited to Cathy. The best gift she could have given Thomas was to face her problems and accept help from others. She is so focused on being the best mum she can be while juggling part-time work, her ongoing appointments and a new marriage. When I visit them now and see Thomas running around and smiling in their new home, I am so happy this family is together. •

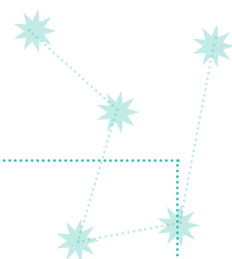
## Reflection

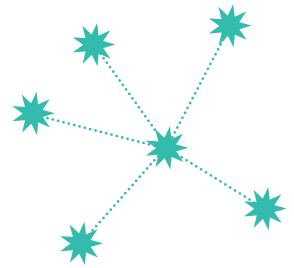
Sarah credits the success of restoring Thomas completely to his mum Cathy but I don't have to be so modest and believe Sarah did an incredible job. Sarah was able to walk in Thomas' shoes and imagine what it would be like for him to have his mum back in his life, her careful planning kept him front and centre of her casework. She took her time, spoke to experts and other important people in Thomas' life and set up a plan that did more than tick a box – it set this family up for triumph.

Underpinning Sarah's good practice were the genuine relationships she built with each member of the family. From when he was just a tiny newborn, Thomas' grandma Rose stepped up and raised him with such love and care. Rose deserved consideration and respect during this transition and Sarah's insight that the process of Rose gradually letting go was just as important as Cathy learning to be a mum, underpinned the success of this restoration. Sarah knew it was essential to have everyone at home when she visited and took the time to really listen to Cathy and Rose's perspectives, helping her to navigate any unexpected issues that cropped up along the way.

Sarah says, 'The best gift Cathy could have given Thomas was to face her problems'. Well, I think the best gift Sarah gave this family was her time, professionalism and empathy. Cathy and Thomas deserve to be together and Sarah should be proud she was able to make this happen.

Roderick Best, Acting Director Legal Services Community Services  
Department of Family and Community Services





## Count to 10

They have had so many adults walk out of their life, they expect that you are going to be the same and let them down, so it's about never giving up and never letting them down. We've all hung in there together with Jason and he is hanging in there with us just as tightly.

Suzie, Youth Worker, Marist Youth Care

*Marist Youth Care is a non-for-profit agency focussed on helping young people at risk and their families. With over 100 years experience, our programs and services have been specifically developed to give young people the support and skills they need to take their rightful place in the community.*



Faisal, Adam, Donna and Beato, youth workers at Marist Youth Care.



Eleven-year-old Jason wasn't safe living at home with his mum so went to stay with his aunt and uncle. They did their best to care for him, however due to the traumatic experiences he had before coming into care, Jason could be really violent which made it unsafe for him to live with them. FACS looked to Marist Youth Care to find him a safe place to live in one of their residential homes. This story is about how five Marist Youth Care youth workers rallied around Jason to help him manage his anger and set him on the right path.

**Donna:** When Jason came to live in the house, the first thing I did was to take him for an ice cream to have a bit of a chat. I wanted to prepare him for what life in our house was like and tell him a little bit about the other boys who lived there. He hardly spoke. I could see he was really nervous about what was happening and where he was going. I let him know he could ask me any questions he wanted.

After the initial shock of the move, I soon realised Jason had a real problem with his temper and very little patience. He would be ticked off at the drop of a hat. He was like a volcano. The other kids at the house could see how easy it was to rile him up so they would make him angry. I told him he had to try and count to 10 in his head before he said or did anything.

A little while later he knocked on my door and said, 'Donna they are really, really giving me the shits but I'm counting!'. The others eventually got bored and he came back to me and said 'It works!'. This was how I started to build some trust with Jason.

**Faisal:** Jason was erratic and his temper was intense so he has a psychologist who

helps him. This clinical support also helps our team better understand the trauma Jason experienced before he came into care and how we can best help him heal. We soon realised that talking a lot when Jason was having a meltdown didn't work. He needed space and time, so we made sure all the team knew this approach worked best.

*This is how we work with all the kids, we have regular meetings, including with the young people, to discuss what's been happening. We make sure we are all on the same page and are being consistent.*

**Adam:** Jason was a fussy eater when he came to us and would just pick at his food. Since then we've introduced him to new foods and his taste has really grown, he now loves things like coconut and pineapple which he had never tried before. Jason also does the shopping with us so he can be part of planning meals and have a say about what goes in the trolley. I make sure Jason and the other boys talk to the people in the shop, unload the trolley and pay for the groceries so they feel part of the community and not just think the house is their whole world. We want them to be healthy and happy but we also need to make sure they have basic life skills. Jason's confidence has really grown as we give him greater responsibilities – it's great to see.

**Suzie:** I think it's important that we show we have trust in young people – it's not just about young people having trust in us. It really gives Jason a boost when I let him do something independently.

Recently he wanted to go down the road on his own, buy something and come back to the house, just like the older boys do. I could

tell how proud he was when he came home and had done this all by himself.

I have also taught him how to budget by using lay-by. He gets pocket money each week if he does his chores and if he wants to buy something expensive like a DVD or new Lego, we put it on lay-by. He understands now that if he saves his money faster, he gets what he wants more quickly. It's just a really simple way to encourage good money management from a young age.

**Chelsea:** I'm fairly new to the house and I could tell how important the life story work was for Jason from the minute I walked in the door. Jason ran up to me and started showing me all the photos in his book, he told me he had a new baby cousin and in the photo was a toy that used to belong to him. Jason felt like this toy was his gift to the baby and felt a real connection to his family through the photos. We make sure this is updated all the time so even though Jason can't live with his family right now, he is still a part of their lives and he in theirs.

**Faisal:** One of the important things we do for our young people is organise excursions away from the house. They get to see the world, learn about new places and it helps them get along with each other. It also improves their social skills and confidence by making them adapt to new surroundings and talk to new people. Neglect takes many forms and often our young people have led limited lives without exposure to new places or experiences.

**Donna:** The other day I took Jason and another one of our other boys to Goulburn for the day. Jason just loved it. He loved the lookout, the old junk shop, the Big Merino

and stopping for lunch. It was such a simple day really and it just shows that our kids have often never been outside of their own suburb. Seeing how excited Jason was to buy an old tin toy car from the junk shop was beautiful. He told me when we got back he wants to take his kids to Goulburn when he grows up, so I think in a small way we are showing Jason what life can be like in stable home, even if it is just a drive on a cold day.

**Adam:** I like to look at ways to make home life fun and happy for Jason and all the young people at the house. I spend a lot of time with Jason building Lego – one of his favourite things to do.

*Being a kid is meant to be fun but for a lot of our boys they have missed out on normal childhood experiences. I believe in the power of play.*

**Beato:** He is great with his hands and we talk about how one day he may go into a trade where he can use his skills in a job. He even brought his own tool kit with him to the house, so we knew straight away we had to encourage this passion.

He loves riding his bike and fixing it. He makes me help, which is really just holding the bike for him while he does everything. He loves pulling things apart and putting them back together. The other day he set about fixing a side table that had broken in the house.

He started to get frustrated when a tool wouldn't work so I said to him, 'What do you do when you start getting angry?' and he said, 'I need to count and go to my room and breathe deeply'. So off he went and calmed down, then came back to his tools. I was so



proud of Jason for being able to tell me what he had to do and then go and do it of his own accord. He had remembered all the conversations we'd had in the past and really showed me how far he'd come.

**Suzie:** I was driving to work a few weeks ago and realised I didn't have any water in my car, so when I pulled up to the house I started to fill it up. Jason saw me and came out to ask what I was doing. Straight away he wanted to help and then asked if we could do the other two cars at the house. This time he did it on his own saying 'I'll do this and you watch to make sure I get it right'.

*Jason was so excited to be able to do that on his own and it's great to see his confidence grow when he learns new skills.*

**Donna:** Jason is more aware of being respectful and apologising when he does something wrong. The other night he swore at me and later when I was doing some paperwork he came to see me. I told him I was busy and he said 'No Donna wait, I want to say sorry before I go to bed,' which was huge coming from him. It is something we

all try to model in the house. None of us are perfect and it's good to be able to show him it's okay if you do something wrong but you have to take responsibility for it.

**Faisal:** All of the hard work at home is paying off with Jason's schooling as well. Jason goes to a special school that understands his needs. He loves going to school and particularly science class. At the last parent-teacher night we went to, the teachers told us how happy they were with Jason's school work and behaviour since coming into our care.

**Chelsea:** If I had to say to another practitioner why our work with Jason has paid off in the eight months he has been with us, I would say it's about being personally invested in the young people you are working with and believing they can make the changes they need to.

**Suzie:** They have had so many adults walk out of their lives, they expect you are going to be the same and let them down.

It's about never giving up and never letting them down. We've all hung in there together with Jason and he is hanging in there with us just as tightly. ●

### Jason's aunt wrote the following letter to thank Marist Youth Care

Dear House Manager and Team,

I am writing to you today to say thank you on behalf of all my family.

My much loved and very missed nephew Jason has been living in this house for the past five months.

In this time we have been privileged to meet all the team who are such beautiful people, that have been so respectful and understanding to Jason and my family.

We have been able to see that your team have managed to build relationships with Jason and he has been able to express himself by speaking about all the carers in a very positive and respectful manner.

In a very emotional and distressing situation for any child, Jason has become more relaxed and acceptable of the care and support he is provided in the home and is able to discuss with me his emotions and feelings and willingness to accept help on how to manage his anger and behaviour towards himself and others.

Jason is now able to recognise his own feelings and speaks about trying to control how he acts out these emotions and I feel this reflects the support he is receiving in the house.

You would all be aware that Jason has difficulty in socialising with others appropriately and the ability to trust that allows a person to build and develop meaningful relationships. I have witnessed all the carers gain Jason's trust and respect, which could only be the result of the commitment they all have to be positive role models to the children in their care.

Jason and my family have found his separation from us all very hard to accept and understand and to be able to move forward. We are reassured that he is supported by the highest quality of carers any family could only wish for in this situation.

You are a very special team of people and should all be so proud of the support and care each member provides to the children and the families involved.

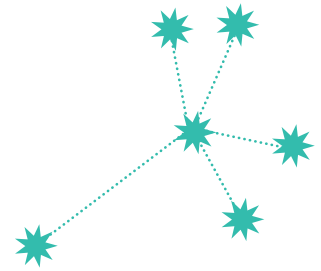
## Reflection

When he left his mother, and then later left his aunt and uncle, Jason must have felt very alone and afraid. The residential unit, with its team approach, and 24-hour staff support, were perfect for the behavioural challenges that he had. The team at the residential unit provided him with high levels of support and equipped him with strategies to manage his intense reactions so that he was safe. The consistent and skilled support by all the team was the foundation on which he learnt and practiced using these strategies.

This story tells us about the power of being 'psychologically held' and supported by a skilled residential team. Young people who have been traumatised like Jason, need a safe environment to develop a mastery over their own reactions. Most of all I loved that Jason had a chance to practice the art of relationship-building and maintenance – how to make restitution, how to say sorry, and how to take responsibility for his own mistakes. This is a skill that will take him a long way, and is likely to help him make and maintain relationships throughout his life. Well done Marist Youth Care youth workers, and well done Jason!

Dr Wendy Foote, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Association of Children's Welfare Agencies





# The long road home

I made sure I was a reliable person in Peter's life. If I said I was going to do something for him I made sure I did it. I knew I had to be true to my word if Peter was going to trust me.

Kelly, Caseworker, Metro Intensive Support Services, Department of Family and Community Services



'The long road home'.

Working with families as a FACS caseworker is often a marathon rather than a sprint.

This was certainly the case with Peter. I first met him almost three years ago when he was 13. He had been in care since the age of 11 due to his serious violence towards his mum Debra and older sister Theresa. Peter's parents had separated but his dad was still a big part of his life.

There was a lot of love in the family but Peter struggled with some pretty tough mental health problems that made it difficult for him to regulate his feelings and behaviour. To keep Peter and his family safe in the short term, he was living in a residential placement and having regular visits with his family.

*Everyone's long-term goal was for Peter to go home to his mum and sister again.*

When we began working together I asked Peter where and when he would like to meet. He has severe anxiety so I wanted to give him some control, even in small decisions and make sure we were meeting on his terms and in an environment where he was comfortable. He suggested we meet at his school in the mornings when he was feeling his best so we started meeting there once a week.

Peter likes to have a chat and has a good sense of humour. We bonded over our love of daggy dad jokes that no one else thinks are funny. I also realised in our first meeting that Peter has genuine insight into his behaviour. This was a real strength and I made good use of it to help Peter think about his impact on the people around him.

There were no quick-fixes with this family – no light bulb moments. We had to be patient and hang in there with Peter, doing a lot

of talking about issues when he needed support.

He would worry about lots of little things like 'I'm too scared to tell my residential carers I don't know how to use dental floss' or 'I'm too scared to tell the teacher I need more time for this exercise'. So after each visit I would make lots of phone calls to help facilitate the changes in his life he needed. This really helped Peter trust me and believe I was in his corner. I learnt the true meaning of advocacy.

Consistency is important for all young people, but particularly for Peter who gets really worried when faced with new people or situations. Routines make him feel safe. I made sure I was a reliable person in Peter's life.

If I said I was going to do something for him I made sure I did it. I knew I had to be true to my word if Peter was going to trust me. In doing this, I modelled taking responsibility for my actions. I made a point of saying sorry if I couldn't follow up on something and explained what had happened. I tried to demonstrate how to deal with mistakes without shame or blame by never holding back on an apology.

I was so happy when Peter asked me to come to his fortnightly counselling sessions. It was proof that he was starting to trust me. For six months I attended as many as I could, which proved to be really useful. When the counsellor gave Peter homework or particular strategies to use, I made sure his residential carers and parents were in the loop so they could help him. I also started a communication book for them to write in for Peter. He carried it with him everywhere so he wouldn't worry about anyone forgetting something he needed to do.



I made sure the people involved in Peter's life had access to the same information and were working towards the same goals.

Every person significant in his life was invited to his monthly case planning meetings – his school teachers, residential carers, counsellor and his parents.

Most importantly, I met with Peter before and after these meetings so I could represent his views at the meeting and keep him informed about what was happening in a way he could understand. He felt too anxious to personally attend the meetings, so this was a less stressful way for him to have a voice in the room.

Even before there were concrete plans for Peter to return home, I included his mum and dad in all of the decisions about his care. It is really important for parents to have a say in their child's life, even when they're not providing the day-to-day care. It can hinder a young person's progress if parents don't feel involved. In this case, Peter's parents were a wonderful part of the team working to help their son. During their visits with Peter they positively reinforced the work of the counsellor and supported him to follow through with his homework.

I worked solidly with Peter for 12 months to manage his violent behaviour, mental health and ability to cope with different situations. Peter had worked incredibly hard and his steady progress meant restoration was a real possibility for the first time in three years. Discussions about Peter's future focused firmly on his return home.

I talked to Peter about returning home and on the spot he began putting together his own restoration plan. He had gained so much insight into his situation that he was able to consider all the different elements.

*Peter recognised the transition would need to happen slowly to make sure everyone was ready to have him back in the family home. To be honest I couldn't have done a better job myself.*

The transition began with Peter spending a day a week with the family, on top of his regular contact visits. It then moved to an overnight and the amount of time Peter spent at home gradually increased.

I was really touched by Peter's insight into the affect his return home would have on his family.

He told me that as Theresa was in the middle of her High School Certificate he thought it would be better to wait until her exams were over before coming home so his coming home didn't add to her stress.

His ability to empathise with others has improved dramatically and made me so proud.

Peter has been living back at home full-time for three months. It hasn't all been smooth sailing but he is happily back with his mum and sister. He and Theresa have grown close again, making up for some of the years when it wasn't safe for them to live together.

I got an emotional phone call from Debra recently telling me she was delighted to have her son home. She told me Theresa felt safe to be around Peter again and she was grateful for my support. Her call meant a lot to me.

This family has been on a long hard journey and I'm glad everyone's commitment, tenacity and love has brought them back together again. ●





# Reflection

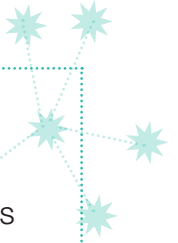
Headspace the National Youth Mental Health Foundation reports that anxiety disorders are the most common mental health problems experienced by young people. In Australia, anxiety disorders are estimated to affect about one in every 10 young people aged 18–24 and about half of people with anxiety disorders experience their first symptoms by the age of 11, which is significantly younger than for most other mental health problems.

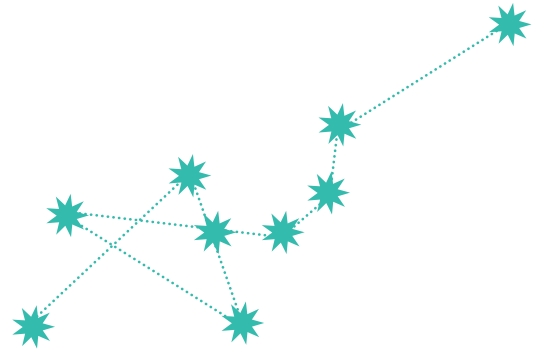
Recently I was reading an article about the implementation of change and a comment stuck with me – change requires discipline and this story is a really great example of how true that is. Building a trusting and helping relationship with Peter required patience, determination and persistence. Kelly knew that it was critical for her to demonstrate her reliability and I imagine her willingness to stick with Peter through challenging times.

He demonstrated his commitment to learn and change and manage his own behaviour and Kelly walked alongside him demonstrating that she could be relied on to be in his corner and advocate for him. I would want Kelly in my corner if I needed someone to stick with me too!

How true – change requires discipline. And I would throw in another ingredient – passion.

Deidre Mulkerin, Deputy Secretary Western Cluster, Department of Family and Community Services





# Dreamworld

Just to see him act like a normal 14-year-old boy was amazing. He was racing from ride to ride with a huge smile on his face. It meant a lot to him that I had followed through on my promise and it showed him that not all adults in his life would let him down.

Chris, House Manager, Life Without Barriers

*Life Without Barriers is a secular, not-for-profit organisation providing care and support services across Australia in urban, rural and remote locations and in New Zealand. It's community-based programs assist children, young people, adults, families and communities spanning care and protection, disability, mental health, homelessness, youth justice and immigration.*





This success story was almost over before it began. Darren came to live at our Life Without Barriers residential care home almost a year ago but, as the house manager, I wasn't sure he would be able to stay.

Darren was going off the rails and would have serious violent outbursts, making it dangerous for our team to be near him. It broke my heart to watch as I knew he couldn't help it. He was dealing with so much pain that it led him to self-harm and act aggressively towards us. His childhood was filled with horrible violence and he had been in care since the age of eight. Now aged 14, Darren suffered from severe post traumatic stress and anxiety.

*As a team, we were scared the next stop for Darren would be Juvenile Justice. We decided to give the arrangement one last chance.*

Our first step was to unite everyone in Darren's life so we were all 'singing from the same songbook'. Darren would push the boundaries as much as possible, or just push them over altogether. This meant it was crucial the team was absolutely consistent with Darren's rules and routines, so he couldn't take advantage of any inconsistencies. We started having weekly meetings with Darren's team that included clinicians, specialists and managers. This helped us draw on a range of expertise and stick carefully to Darren's care plan, a document that helps us meet a child's day-to-day and long term needs across education, health, culture and family connections.

The care team focused on routine matters such as making sure everyone knew Darren's bed time, through to major decisions like his psychiatric care. What made this work so

well was everyone's commitment to come together and be open to advice, observations and ideas. Darren's psychiatrist completed a review of his medications and tracked their impact on his mood, sleep and behaviour. The team knew Darren's regime and made sure he took the right medication at the right time which helped him sleep better at night and regulated his extreme moods.

During my chats with Darren, he told me he enjoyed tinkering with electronics, so I found him a junior electronics kit. Straight away, I noticed a shift in his mood when he was doing something he enjoyed rather than just sitting on the couch. I also discovered we both loved fishing. Finding a common interest was important as it allowed us to form a genuine bond. Fishing also helped Darren stay calm as he enjoyed the peace and quiet when we were by the water.

We're now building a skateboard half-pipe that Darren has been involved in planning and buying building materials for. It's great to see him so motivated.

Darren hadn't been able to go to school for some time and I felt his boredom had been contributing to his outbursts. Building on his passion for electronics, fishing and skateboarding, I worked with his distance education providers to link these activities with learning outcomes. These activities have allowed Darren to make small and steady gains in terms of re-engaging with learning. He was actually quite embarrassed about not going to school and this was an important step in making him feel better about himself.

Through our time together, it became evident that Darren carried with him a deep sense of abandonment and mistrust. At various



placements and over many years, he had asked to visit his brother and go to Dreamworld. Despite being promised these things by many different people, he had moved around a number of times and no-one had ever followed through for him. These two wishes were not a lot to ask for and I believed making them happen would greatly benefit his therapeutic care. So with careful planning, I arranged for us to spend three days in Queensland to see through his wishes.

To be honest, the time I spent with Darren at Dreamworld was one of the most rewarding of my career. Just to see him act like a normal 14-year-old boy was amazing. He was racing from ride to ride with a huge smile on his face.

Next, we planned a meeting with his older brother who he hadn't seen in years. The reunion was overwhelming. The young men were so happy to see one another. The visit helped Darren realise that someone in his family still cared for him and was interested in his life. We are now planning an overnight stay to further strengthen this important relationship.

*It meant a lot to him that I had followed through on my promise and it showed him that not all adults in his life would let him down.*

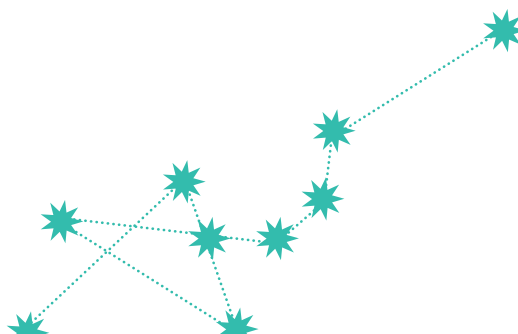
Darren is now starting to enjoy his hobbies, sleep better and trust the people in his life. The team even managed to convince him to

see a dentist and get a blood test. I admit I had to suffer through a blood test at the same time so he would do it, but at least it worked. These simple health checks, that most of us take for granted, have been impossible up to now because of Darren's anxiety, so it's an important breakthrough for his overall wellbeing.

Reflecting on why our team has managed to make such progress with Darren, I think it comes down to lots of small and consistent steps by a team that really cares. There are no short cuts with young people who are affected by trauma. Time and patience are big factors.

I can't believe it's been less than a year and we are already talking about raising the bar for Darren. The whole team would love to see him make friends and learn how to be around people his age, so this is something we are working towards.

One of the greatest rewards is just seeing Darren smile like a regular 14-year-old. When I first met him, I think a whole month went by and I'd never seen him smile once. Now, when I see him enjoying life with a big smile on his face, it really makes my day. ●



# Reflection

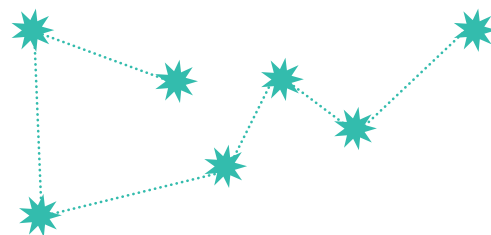
Three things stood out for me when I read Darren's story: the focus on him and the commitment and perseverance of the team in keeping that focus and making it real.

In modern society, the efficiency of the system is more important than the person. To paraphrase slightly my favourite economist, Amartya Sen, 'A society can be perfectly efficient and still be perfectly disgusting'. For Darren, the system clearly moved him around a lot and didn't respond to his needs. Yet, each thing that happened to him after he entered care probably made sense for the workings of the system.

It was when he came into the LWB residential care home as a last chance that his needs became the focus. That didn't mean that he got his own way! The team set fair and reasonable boundaries and stuck to them. I'm sure that wasn't always easy. Having structure is one thing but working out what gave him joy and purpose was the other essential part of the plan. Finding that he enjoyed electronics and fishing provided the additional bonus of the opportunity to engage with education. The team was focused on him as an individual.

My experience as a manager of many years is that consistency and structure is important to most of us. Very few people embrace constant change and none of us want to be treated as a tiny cog in a big system. All of us want to be valued and validated as individuals. I'm glad that Darren is experiencing some of that making progress and I wish him all the best.

Eleri Morgan-Thomas, Executive Director Service Systems Delivery  
Department of Family and Community Services



# Finding family

When it was confirmed we had found the right family, we worked with Jack's psychiatrist about the best way to present the information to him. I worked on making a special album for Jack, which had genograms, photographs and positive stories about his family. It was a big moment for Jack and me when we finally sat down and went through the album together.

Maree, Caseworker, Intensive Support Services, Department of Family and Community Services

I work at FACS Intensive Support Service. Our work is with children and young people in care who have complex needs requiring special support. I first met Jack when he was 11 and having trouble settling into care. He hated everything about it. He hated FACS and he hated me.

During the three years I have worked with Jack, I have seen him at least once a month. Given that Jack didn't like me very much to begin with, sometimes our meetings were brief. I might drive to visit him and only spend 15 minutes together. Thankfully, I have an awesome management team that understand this is the nature of the work with kids like Jack. We have to hang in there to build a good relationship and that can take time.

Since that early rocky start with Jack, we have developed a strong relationship. Jack has wonderful professionals in his life, from his previous FACS casework team to youth services, Aboriginal caseworkers, his school, psychiatrist and paediatrician. Part of my job as a caseworker is to communicate and coordinate so that Jack gets a united team approach from those around him. I keep in touch with everyone to acknowledge the achievements and work through challenges. I visit Jack at home, organise case plan meetings and go with Jack to some of his health appointments and school meetings. We also spend a lot of time in the holidays just having a good time. We've gone to the movies, played golf, tried new foods together and generally had lots of fun.

We don't give up on the young people we work with. We tell them that we will stick around for the whole of their journey through care and beyond, if that is what they need.

This philosophy has really worked with Jack. He asks me, 'Will you fight for me?' and I tell him that we will always advocate for him. It's hard to sum up such a complex young man but if I had to choose just three words to describe Jack, I would say he is strong, persistent and kind.

'Life story' work, such as in this case, is important to children in care – it is a way of making sure their story is not lost. It can also help to make sense of difficult experiences they may have had and can reconnect them with family members. Jack had never met his father. All he knew was his dad's name was Ralph and the town he came from. He told me he wanted to know more about him.

Over a few visits and phone calls, Jack's mum was able to remember more and more information, like details of Ralph's family and where they used to live. The jigsaw puzzle started to come together, but the picture was far from clear.

We continued to gather information. It was a tricky time – Jack knew I was searching for his family, but I didn't want to share it with him just yet in case it turned out to be wrong.

Many other professionals helped us find more clues – Aboriginal caseworkers, psychologists, partnership and planning colleagues and funded services staff.

Sadly, at the same time we positively identified Ralph as Jack's father, we also found out Ralph had died some years before.

Fortunately, I also believed I had found Jack's grandmother who was still alive. I felt a great responsibility, and knew I needed to be thorough, careful and sensitive with this information. What I had discovered was



life-changing, not just for Jack, but for his extended family as well.

*I needed to work out a way to tell a boy that the father he was looking for and had never met, had passed away. At the same time I also had to tell a grandmother she had a grandson she never knew existed.*

The support of our Aboriginal Support Team was invaluable in finding the best way forward. They helped me meet with Jack's grandmother. She knew Ralph might have had a son but the details she had didn't quite fit with Jack's story. A decision was made to undertake DNA testing to make sure that we really had found Jack's family as we didn't want any more disappointments in his life. When it was confirmed we had found the right family, we worked with Jack's psychiatrist about the best way to present the information to him. I made a special album for Jack, which had genograms, photographs and positive stories about his family.

It was a big moment for Jack and me when we finally sat down and went through the album together. He had so many questions about Ralph, his grandmother and his country.

We made a plan for Jack to meet with his grandmother. It's about a four-hour drive from Jack's residential unit to her home.

When the day arrived, Jack was so nervous he didn't want to get in the car. Two and a half hours later – after talking through Jack's worries and anxiety – we were finally on our way.

My manager was in the office 300 kilometres away and said she was on tenterhooks all day just thinking about the meeting.

It was incredible when Jack and his grandmother finally met. Jack is quite shy but she gave him a big hug straight away.

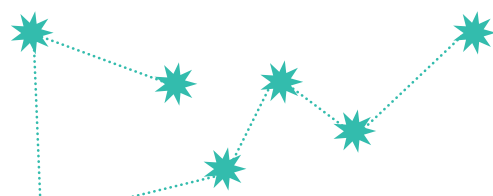
He also got to spend time playing with his cousins. It was hard when it was time to leave. Jack now sees his family once a month and will soon be spending overnight visits with them.

This reunion was one of the many great aspects of my work as well as being able to work closely and consistently with a young person in care.

Finding Jack's family has been a journey and a balancing act. We needed to think about moving at a pace that worked for Jack and the needs of his family. When we first met Jack's grandmother she gave us the order of service for Ralph's funeral which was decorated in the colours of the Aboriginal flag. This reminded us how important and personal the journey was for her and her family and it's great to see Jack more connected to his culture by spending time with his family 'on country'.

This journey has been complex and it's not over yet. Although it is very exciting we found Jack's family, we also need to make sure we got this right for all the people that care about Jack.

Life story work with young people can be challenging. Sometimes the information is difficult to find and relationships take time to build. I would say to other caseworkers – be persistent, give it time, and keep trying to think outside the square. ●

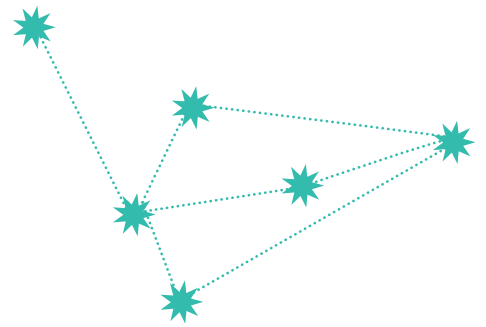


# Reflection

Care, understanding and tenacity are at the core of casework undertaken by Maree and other staff to support Jack to realise his roots. They were able to provide Jack with an opportunity to have a sense of identity and belonging with family he may not have ever known if Maree and others hadn't cared and persisted enough to uncover Jack's father and grandmother.

The heartening realisation for Jack is that while Maree and others will play an important and significant part in Jack's life, they have started the journey to ensure Jack has a lifetime connection to his family and Aboriginal identity and culture.

Kylie Jacky, Director Aboriginal Services, Department of Family and Community Services



# What was your dad like when you were growing up?

One discussion that really stood out was when I asked him to imagine when his children were adults and someone asked them, ‘What was your dad like when you were growing up?’ I asked him, ‘What would he like them to say?’ It stopped him in his tracks. He loves his children so much and wanted them to be proud of him.

Joseph walked into my office straight from court where he had just faced charges of assault. He was distressed and ashamed. The week before, he had slapped his wife Dana several times and shoved her violently in front of their two youngest children.

As a caseworker at a FACS Family Violence Service, it is my role to support victims of family violence. In some cases, I work with the perpetrators of violence, with the ultimate goal of keeping families with children safe. I see only those men who continue to live with their families or where both partners intend to stay together. That way, the work I do with men is still about keeping women and children safe.

I knew I would be able to work with Joseph from our first meeting. He told me he wanted to make his marriage work and, importantly, he took responsibility for his behaviour.

Joseph agreed to attend weekly meetings with me. He understood I would talk to his wife regularly to monitor the family's safety and check he was making changes. Joseph also knew I could talk to Dana about what he had said but Dana's discussions would be confidential. Joseph and Dana said this was the first time he had ever been violent and he needed help so that it would never happen again.

Joseph's commitment was evident in his decision to comply with the apprehended violence order (AVO) imposed by the court. This included the condition that he could not live in the family home for a period of time. Joseph chose to live in his car because, as the family's sole bread-winner, this allowed him to continue to support his family financially and not spend extra money on a hotel. This

demonstrated his focus was firmly on the wellbeing of his wife and children giving me a strong place to start.

Joseph ended up spending a total of eight very cold and uncomfortable weeks sleeping in his car in the middle of winter where he was constantly worried someone may attack him.

I drew on these feelings of fear and vulnerability to help him understand how scared Dana and his children would have felt during the assault. It helped him empathise with his wife's terror and the ongoing uncertainty he had brought into their lives.


During our initial sessions together, we talked about his life and his role as a man, friend, husband and father. I made it clear to Joseph that he made a choice to use violence and asked him to remember times when he had been angry in the past but had chosen not to be violent. I didn't focus my work on shaming or blaming him but rather on listening respectfully to his experiences, being honest and direct with my responses.

During group supervision with my peers I would reflect on my work. I made sure I was being truly respectful in my interactions with Joseph. I remained encouraging and hopeful he could make positive changes in his life.

Joseph and Dana had been married for three years. Dana had three children from a previous relationship aged five, seven and 10. Together they had two children aged two and three. It was a busy home and Joseph didn't have any relatives in Australia to support him as both he and Dana are from Indonesia.







Joseph was feeling stressed and tired most of the time and we talked about this a lot. For a start he was very sleep-deprived. He worked afternoon shifts and returned home at midnight. He would get up to the small children in the night and then would wake up early to help his wife in getting the older children ready for school. He and Dana didn't spend much time alone and the whole family was suffering from a lack of routine. I took a holistic approach to Joseph's life and together looked at small changes we could build on.

In our sessions I focused on equipping him with communication skills so he would manage his issues and emotions without choosing to be violent. Joseph needed help to learn how to talk about his feelings with Dana so his frustrations wouldn't escalate over time and result in further violence.

Joseph didn't have many close friends he could open up to, so it was really important he and his wife were honest about their emotions with one another. Once Dana told me she felt safe enough to do some work on their marriage, I referred them to Relationships Australia for couples counselling. Joseph and I talked about how he could learn to recognise his danger signs. We talked about techniques he could use to prevent further violence, for example, walking away when tensions rose during an argument to take time to calm down.

We took a long time working through his feelings of failure – he felt he had let his children down by being violent. He said to me, 'How can I be a good father after they have seen me do such a terrible thing?' Working through these feelings was critical.

I explained that while he can't undo what had happened, he could role-model accountability by admitting to the older children he had made a terrible mistake, for which he was paying the price, and was now getting help so it would never happen again. Joseph apologised to Dana and her three eldest children for hurting her. He talked to them about how he knew violence was very wrong and he had to face the consequences and get help.

*I had helped Joseph see it wasn't too late to be a good future role model even if he felt ashamed about what had happened.*

One discussion that really stood out was when I asked him to imagine when his children were adults and someone asked them, 'What was your dad like when you were growing up?' I asked him, 'What would you like them to say?' It stopped him in his tracks. He loves his children so much and wanted them to be proud of him.

I gave Joseph lots of reading material about the impact of domestic violence on families and in particular how it stays with children. This was a useful way to continue the work we were doing outside of our sessions and prompted Joseph to reflect on the family environment he wanted to create for the future. Reading helps to reinforce learning. Asking Joseph to complete homework gave him a sense of success and achievement.

After eight weeks the AVO condition preventing Joseph from living in the family home was removed and he was able to return. He took lots of small practical steps to make family life more enjoyable. For example, getting more sleep and spending one-on-one

time with his children, including morning jogs with his eldest son. It was great to see the discussions we had played out in his home life.

Joseph was sad when our nine months together came to an end. However, both Joseph and Dana know they can contact me at anytime should there be future safety concerns.

It takes courage and strength for men who have been violent to come forward and face up to the consequences and choose to make positive changes for themselves and their families.

I wonder what would have happened if Joseph hadn't walked in the door that day? The window of opportunity for people to make change is critical at the crisis intervention stage and this family's story could have been very, very different.

It was a positive experience to work with someone who was committed to make genuine, long-term changes for themselves and their family and thankfully there hasn't been any more violence in this home. •

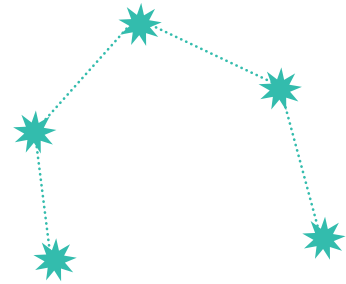
## Reflection

Through her great casework, Lynn has helped make the lives of seven people so much better. Every step of the way, her actions focused on helping to build a better, safer home for the children and their mum. I was impressed by the way Lynn could see positive signs all through a really difficult situation. From her first meeting with Joseph she saw his strengths and worked honestly and fairly with him and with his wife, Dana. Lynn helped Joseph realise how he had made his family feel when he was violent. She recognised and worked with his willingness to own his actions and with his empathy and love for his family to help him change. Lynn also built the foundations to help the family make those changes last.

Working in our department, it's easy to take for granted the huge impact our caseworkers have on the lives of children and families across NSW every day – sometimes we think of it as 'just what they do'. But this story reminds me how important a FACS caseworker's role is and what special people they are.

Marilyn Chilvers, Executive Director Frontline Resource Management  
Department of Family and Community Services





# A safe place to land

Professionally, I had to keep a close eye on myself working with Kendall. I had formed such a close relationship with her that at times I felt I had lost my focus on the unborn child. Working with pregnant women can be hard because you don't have the baby in front of you, so you have to remind yourself to think about the child's best interests.

Liz, Caseworker, Department of Family and Community Services

Kendall was 27 weeks pregnant with her second child when she was referred to us as part of the Perinatal Family Conferencing Pilot.

Perinatal Family Conferencing is a joint project between FACS and NSW Health to support pregnant women at risk of their newborns being taken into care. Throughout their pregnancy we give expectant mums professional support to make important changes to their lives and increase the possibility they will be able to take their new baby home.

I read the case notes held by FACS from their previous work with Kendall and her first child. Her story was really sad and complicated. Kendall had been using heroin and doing sex work to pay for her habit. Her baby girl had been taken into care because it wasn't safe for her to live with her mum. That was two and a half years ago and now she was pregnant again.

The first meeting we had was a bit difficult for Kendall as it brought up feelings of grief and shame from when her daughter was removed. Her mum was with her at the time and I got the impression Kendall wasn't comfortable talking about her past with her around. I knew I had to work to build a rapport with Kendall to gain her trust and confidence. I had plenty of time to have those hard conversations with Kendall, so at our first meeting I focused on letting her know all about the program. This gave us the space to get to know one another.

At our next meeting Kendall seemed more open to talking about her previous drug use without her mum there. We talked about how much she had changed. She said she stopped using heroin when her daughter

went into care and had worked really hard to turn her life around.

*I felt such respect for Kendall's determination and that she took full responsibility for what happened in the past.*

She described the deep shame she felt and I could see the relationship with her mum was difficult. She said her mum didn't really help or support her to get on track when her daughter was removed and she had spiralled further and further out of control.

Kendall was keen to take part and met with the facilitator and I to discuss the program further. She was anxious about meeting up with other people in FACS who might know her from before and was embarrassed to include family members in the conference because she was ashamed.

To build on my good rapport with Kendall we met one-on-one before the first pregnancy family conference. I let Kendall take her time in telling me her story in detail. From there our relationship went from strength to strength.

Part of working with pregnant women in the program is making sure they are able to voice what is working well for them as well as any worries or concerns they may have in an open and safe space. At the first meeting there are three key questions we ask all expecting mums. They are, 'What is working well for you?', 'What are your worries about the baby and your family?' and 'What needs to happen to make sure your baby is safe in the future?'

This approach is based on the casework practice tool called the Three Houses, which allows practitioners to explore what's working



well for parent, what they are worried about and what needs to happen in a series of drawings. This technique is a simple way to guide conversations and it helped Kendall identify her strengths, worries and hopes for the future. I made sure I was clear with Kendall about our concerns so she knew what she needed to do so her baby could go home with her.

Perinatal Family Conferencing is about identifying the risks, getting everything out on the table and being open, honest and transparent. I think this transparency is one of the most important ways we build respectful relationships with clients. Without that relationship and trust you have no chance.

*Together we focused on Kendall staying drug free, finding her own place that was safe to raise a baby in and getting counselling to help with her grief and loss.*

Perinatal Family Conferencing worked well for Kendall. She said she felt she was being listened to – that people were interested in how she felt and that they wanted to know what she had to say about her past and where she is now.

I worked closely with a social worker from NSW Health to support Kendall. As we had worked with a lot of mums together, we had built up a strong professional relationship. While at times there can be different opinions on the risks in a case, this program brings the strengths and concerns about a family out into the open. The structure of the program made it simpler to share information and the process was highly collaborative and positive for everyone involved, including Kendall.

Over the weeks, Kendall's confidence grew and she eventually met with the FACS staff she had known from before but had felt too anxious to face. It was a positive experience for everyone to see the huge changes in Kendall.

Professionally, I had to keep a close eye on myself working with Kendall. I had formed such a close relationship with her that at times I felt I had lost my focus on the unborn child. Working with pregnant women can be hard because you don't have the baby in front of you, so you have to remind yourself to think about the child's best interests.

Group supervision with other caseworkers was useful because people would role play the part of the unborn child to challenge and refocus my thinking. Regular talks with my manager also helped keep me on track.

During our months together Kendall worked to address the risks identified in the first meeting.

When her baby boy, Jay, was born she took him home with her. A month after the birth of Jay, Kendall was doing so well I was able to close her case.

I followed up with Kendall four months later and she told me she was going well with her parenting, managing issues as they came up and had found a lovely two bedroom home. Kendall reconnected with her aunt and cousins, one of whom has three children, and is thinking about going back to Children's Court to have her daughter restored to her care.

Reflecting on the program, Kendall said to me, 'It was intimidating at first, the thought of being in the program. What I found out though was it sounded more intimidating than it actually was. All the hard stuff was



discussed in the first meeting. I felt more at ease after each meeting. I am glad I went through the program and that my caseworker made me feel comfortable and that I felt comfortable with her’.

I am confident Kendall’s resolve will put her in her good stead to do things differently this time around. I am looking forward to hearing her news and how little Jay is going when I follow up with her in a few months time. ●

## Reflection

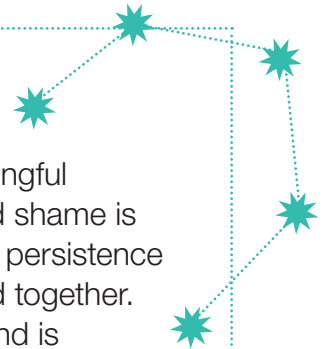
This story speaks of the hope and strength that is created through a meaningful partnership. Kendall’s resilience to pull herself out of the depths of grief and shame is incredibly moving and paired with Liz’s skilled use of empathy, warmth and persistence propelled them towards the ultimate goal of keeping a mother and her child together. The way that Liz created space and safety around Kendall was profound and is evocative of the quote, ‘You don’t have to be a therapist to be therapeutic’.

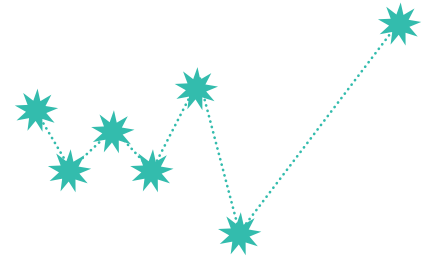
The respectful nature of the conferences illustrates a true sense of teamwork, with Kendall as the key team member. It is a wonderful example of solid collaborative practice that empowers a mum to create change and supporting a shared vision for the future of this new baby. What a powerful forum to discuss risk honestly and respectfully alongside a mother. It describes perfectly that various opinions and perspectives are needed to unpack the grey areas and create a realistic plan.

I was impressed with Liz’s insight and honesty about her own practice and in leaning on her colleagues to critically reflect her work – it demonstrates her bravery and integrity.

The mingling together of Liz’s skilled approach, great collaborative efforts and effective relationships based on empathy alongside Kendall’s strength and fortitude have brought about a wonderful start to life for Jay, who is safe at home with his mum.

Miranda Moir, Principal Project Officer, Office of the Senior Practitioner  
Department of Family and Community Services





# Draw me a picture

Sue was able to see that her own childhood was very different from that of her kids. This was one of the first breakthroughs for Sue. She could see that her childhood had been stable and secure, whereas Jacob and Livinia had no routine or structure. Sue didn't want this for her kids, she wanted better.

Pauline, Caseworker, Department of Family and Community Services

When I met this family, dad, John, was in gaol for breaching a good behaviour bond for physically assaulting his wife, Sue.

*During the assault Jacob, 10 years old, grabbed a knife and jumped between his parents saying, 'Don't hurt my mum'. He must have been terrified for his mum to do this.*

That left Sue, Jacob and his baby sister, Livinia, at home. John and Sue had been having trouble looking after Jacob and Livinia because of John's violence, Sue's alcohol use and not having a stable home for the family. The family has both an Aboriginal and Maori cultural background.

When I first spoke to Sue she was very anxious. She spoke at a hundred miles an hour, blinked constantly and was unable to focus. Sue was so anxious she couldn't leave the house, not even to hang the washing on the line or put the bins out. Jacob had to do a lot of this work for his mum. It was really hard to get a clear picture about what was going on in the family. I had to try and get her to slow down and think clearly.

I asked Sue to start writing a 'mind map' that reflected her life including her childhood, her relationships and her alcohol use. Together we used the map to slowly explore the different areas of her life. We were able to start having real conversations without any sense of pressure or interrogation.

This way of working helped Sue realise she had had a very stable childhood with a culturally traditional upbringing. Sue was raised by her grandparents in New Zealand and spoke three different Maori languages. When she was 16 years old her grandparents

died and Sue moved to Australia to live with her mum. She found this sudden change difficult to deal with and started drinking to cope.

Sue was able to see that her own childhood was very different to that of her kids. This was one of the first breakthroughs for Sue. She could see that her childhood had been stable and secure, whereas Jacob and Livinia had no routine or structure. The family were always on the move, Jacob had been to about 20 different schools and their lives were fairly chaotic. Sue didn't want this for her kids, she wanted better.

Another breakthrough happened when one of my colleagues, a Maori caseworker, came with me to visit Sue. Together they talked about culture. My colleague was able to build on the work Sue had already done by challenging her around her use of alcohol and how traditionally it's unacceptable in Maori culture. They discussed some of Jacob's behaviours and interactions with his mum. Sue was able to see a loss of culture in her family unit. This was a really powerful insight and another catalyst for change.

As a child John had been removed from his mother and placed in care where he was abused. Understandably John was initially distrustful and reluctant to work with FACS.

*It was really important to form a relationship with this family that was built on respect for their cultures. Consulting and working with culturally appropriate caseworkers was essential.*

Simply helping out with some of the day-to-day practical stuff was also important. I sat with Sue as she made phone calls to





agencies. I watched Livinia while Sue attended doctors appointments and undertook drug testing. I went to a meeting at school with Sue and John when Jacob was suspended. This showed the family I had time for them. It created an ideal opportunity to get to know little Livinia and observe how she was going. It also meant a lot to Sue. It gave us time to talk and this is when she really started to be honest with me about her drinking.

At the same time Jacob and I used drawings and casework practice tool called the Three Houses to explore his experiences. At first Jacob didn't want to get his parents into trouble, he didn't want to say too much. This was a safe strategy for him as he preferred to draw and not have too many questions asked of him.

*The drawing was central to getting Jacob to feel relaxed with me. The free-flow drawing and talking helped me really communicate with Jacob and form a strong relationship.*

Really early on I let Jacob know I wanted to make sure he and his sister were safe. I asked Jacob to do a drawing focusing on a tree to represent his life, a house to represent his home and a person to represent himself. The next time I saw Jacob he was able to use his drawing to tell a long and detailed story about the different aspects of his life. I learnt a lot about Jacob including that his favourite place in the world was his classroom. Information from Jacob's drawings and stories were used in case planning so he really had a voice in the decisions.

Using the case plan was key to helping Sue and John bring about the changes needed in

their lives. John was included in discussions and case plan meetings, via telephone while he was still in gaol. John and Sue both had very clear ideas about the types of support they needed to improve their parenting and the lives of their kids. Having a detailed case plan broken up into phases really helped the family manage the variety of tasks being asked of them and provided plenty of opportunity to review their achievements.

The case plan also gave them ownership over the future direction of their lives. I helped the family build on their strengths and in partnership we moved forward. Both John and Sue could see their past behaviours were not working for the children and that change was needed. They were given the opportunity to reflect on their lives and the lives of their children in a non-judgemental way and this helped them to seek the support they needed.

Sue's attending a support group that focuses on healthy and positive relationships and she keeps a journal so she can keep track of how she is going. It helps her to be more in control of her life. She's able to bring to the table things she wants to raise. Sue's also going to counselling to work through her anxiety and alcohol use.

Unfortunately John is suffering from cancer and recently had his lymph glands removed. As soon as his health settles down John will participate in an anger management program and domestic violence course through Probation and Parole. For now John continues to be supported by his Probation and Parole caseworker. He also has a caseworker from the Cancer Council to help him understand his cancer and it's impact.

Despite John's health, the whole family's travelling really well. They have stable housing and Jacob is settled at the one school. He is attending an after school art program and is very proud that his art has recently been chosen to be on display in the local regional art gallery. As part of the case plan Jacob has joined Scouts which he loves. He also goes to homework sessions after school some days and will soon be seeing a child protection counsellor to talk through some of his experiences.

Jacob's excited to know his family's story might be published. John is also keen for their story be used as an example of good practice.

As an Aboriginal man who was removed as a child from his suicidal mother by child protection authorities, he feels that if his mum had been given similar support at the time, he would not have been removed and his life would have been significantly different.

Hearing from Sue that, 'Family and Community Services is the best thing that has happened to me' is a humbling reminder that as caseworkers we can make a difference in the lives of families we work with. •

## Reflection

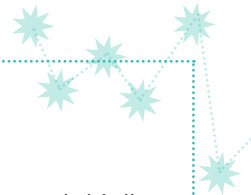
In reading Pauline's story about her work with Jacob, Livinia, John and Sue, I was initially most struck by the sheer complexity of the life this family leads, with so many pressures and stresses and also quite a few interventions to manage. Jacob's extreme reaction to seeing his mother under attack speaks to how frightened he must have been – as any of us would. Add to that, he has changed school on average four times per year.

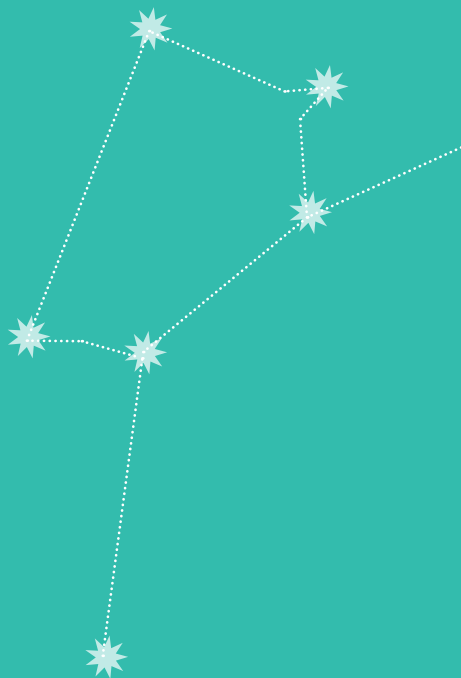
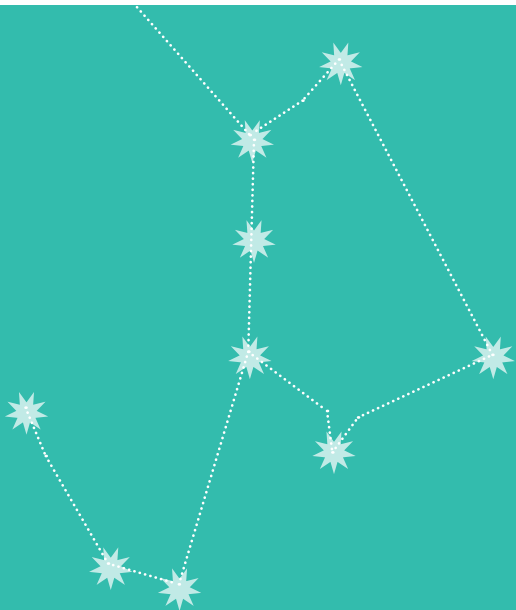
I was also struck by the range of strategies which Pauline has at her disposal to get alongside the family, especially Jacob. I could see that when one approach didn't work, Pauline adapted and tried a different approach. The use of drawing with Jacob, providing practical assistance, the mind map with Sue, demonstrating respect for Sue's culture, the use of a journal, involving John in a case conference from goal – these are a few of the strategies Pauline used. Her repertoire is impressive.

Pauline got alongside each of the family members but most importantly she used her wide range of strategies to understand Jacob and assess the risks to Livinia. All of this puts Pauline in a position from which she can assess if her and others' interventions are helping to make things better for the two children or whether some other intervention is needed.

I felt proud to be on the same FACS team as Pauline.

Paul Vevers, Deputy Secretary Southern Cluster, Department of Family and Community Services





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