



Children in Care Collective



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Updates on CCC website

At the beginning of 2020, the Collective updated its website with additional information about its purpose and governance. These can be found under the revised *About Us* webpage.

The Collective's aims are to:

- Provide a unified voice that informs the community on issues about children and young people with complex needs
- Be a proactive partner with regulators and funders so as to improve the overall policy and practice environment that relates to children and young people with complex needs
- Be a “think tank” for work with children and young people with complex needs
- Foster collaboration by identifying high level organisational needs and opportunities for resource sharing
- Model a strengths-based partnership approach.

On the *Joint Positions* page, is a statement from the Collective supporting the call on the Australian Council of Attorneys-General by the Australian and New Zealand Children’s Commissioners and Guardians (ANZCCG) to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 years of age to the internationally recognised standard of 14 years.

This was an issue raised in the Concluding Observations made by the United Nations

Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) following the most recent periodic reports from Australia on the implementation of child rights in Australia. The UNCRC’s recommendation is that ‘Australia raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility to an internationally accepted level and make it conform with the upper age of 14 at which *doli incapax applies*’ (paragraph 48(a) ‘Concluding Observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Australia’ 30/09/19).

Reviewing achievements in 2019

The survey of members’ views about the Collective’s work in 2019 indicated confidence in a growing sense of the CCC making a positive impact on its policy objectives, noting that an increased focus on tangible outcomes and a clearer understanding of its impact would be of benefit.

Members valued the opportunities for working collaboratively with government ministers, government departments, peak bodies, and regulators. The discussions and workshops reinforced the importance of working cooperatively to ensure coordinated and focused effort to improve policy and practice in the out-of-home care sector.



The Collective’s work to date in 2020

Child protection and out-of-home care viewed through a child rights lens

Following the discussion in December about the 2019 report of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the implementation of child rights in Australia (reported in the December edition of the Bulletin) the Collective agreed that it would be valuable to refocus its work to incorporate the

implications for current practice in out-of-home care.

First steps in this refocusing included identifying an issue where the Collective could have a practical impact. It was decided to take up the issue of the

access of all children to education, noting the poorer educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care that are well documented. The particular focus of the Collective is reducing the high rate of suspensions and expulsions of children with complex needs in public schools.

In 2017, ACWA embarked upon an advocacy initiative to raise the unacceptable levels of educational disadvantage currently experienced by children and young people living in out-of-home care in NSW. Following a roundtable, ACWA established a quarterly meeting of representatives from the NSW Department of Education, the Department of Family and Community Services, other departments directly involved in providing services for children and young people in out-of-home care, and non-government stakeholders. At the quarterly meeting in September 2018, the Department of Education announced that it was reviewing its current policy on suspensions and expulsions and would include consideration of unintended consequences for children and young people in care as a result of the existing policy. With light of changes in ACWA's priorities, and following consultation, it was agreed that the Collective should take up this issue.

The Department of Communities and Justice provided an update on work it was undertaking with the Department of Education to streamline the OOHC Education Pathway process to ensure timely support for each child and young person in out-of-home care. This work includes ongoing

cross sector workshops to enhance workforce knowledge of the OOHC Education Pathway process by improving communication between out-of-home care caseworkers, their counterparts from DoE and Catholic and Independent schools. One of the topics covered in the workshops is how caseworkers can work proactively with schools to prevent suspensions and commence planning for the child's return to school as early as possible.

Representatives of the Collective also met with the Department of Education to discuss the department's progress in reviewing its discipline and suspension policy and in implementing recommendations from a Legislative Council report which incorporated proposals for change put forward by the NSW Ombudsman relevant to the management of children with complex needs at school.

The review of the discipline and suspension policy is still underway and is likely to be implemented at the beginning of 2021. The department is intending broad cultural change and noted the complexities in implementation. The Collective representatives confirmed its willingness to consult on the revised policy and assist with implementation, noting its particular interest in the nexus between individualised learning and behaviour plans developed for children and young people in residential out-of-home care settings and the application of discipline and suspension policies in schools.

The importance of a theory of change

At its April meeting, Annette Michaux of the Parenting Research Centre, led a discussion about the importance of developing a theory of change to ensure that the Collective's work is focused and its influence on issues can be clearly identified. Compared with a results logic, a theory of change can be more flexible, enabling evaluation of results to take into account real life variables including other players. Some Collective agencies are already engaged in developing a theory of change and

spoke enthusiastically about the process.

While not yet committing to the whole process, we decided to embark on the first step – developing a vision of what success would look like for the Collective.

The process of developing this vision of success will enable the Collective to refresh and refine its purpose.

Health and wellbeing in out-of-home care

While the pandemic forced the cancellation of planned forums in 2020, the Collective decided to continue working with the CREATE Foundation on a survey of the views of children and young people in out-of-home care focusing on their health and wellbeing.

The Collective contributed to the design of the survey which participants could complete using a link to an online survey or by phone with a CREATE staff member.

CREATE has provided the Collective with the report it has compiled based on the survey results. A copy of the full report can be found on the Collective's website under *Latest News* on the Home page (click [here](#) to view the report). Some key points were as follows:

- Overall, the responses from young people indicated a good level of health and wellbeing and understanding of what they need to do to stay healthy and well.
- Having positive/respectful relationships and strong connections was seen as key to being healthy and well and having a good and happy life.
- Biggest concerns or worries were about mental and emotional health and access to help and support.
- Most frequently, young people said they would talk to their carer but many also said



they would talk to a caseworker or health care worker.

- Information that was viewed as important for increasing wellbeing included service type information; general health and wellbeing education and strategies; psychological strategies and nutrition.

The results of this research will form the basis of a forum with children and young people to discuss their concerns in more depth and develop projects to support high levels of health and wellbeing. Discussions are underway about how to hold this forum online rather than bringing everyone together in one space as originally planned.

Bringing a population health perspective to child protection

Professor Daryl Higgins, Director, Institute of Child Protection Studies at Australian Catholic University is a member of the Children in Care Collective. At our June meeting, Professor Higgins gave a presentation on 'The public health

approach to child protection: Population-based strategies to prevention of child maltreatment', building on work covered in his recent co-edited publication:

Lonne, B., Scott, D., Higgins, D., & Herrenkohl, T. (Eds.) (2019). *Re-visioning public health approaches for protecting children*. Child Maltreatment 9: Contemporary Issues in Research and Policy Series. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05858-6>

Professor Higgins began by explaining that a public health approach to child abuse prevention is predicated on identifying risk factors and then implementing strategies across the entire community to address those risk factors. The aim of this approach is to alter the risk profile of the whole population and protect all children by ensuring safe and supportive environments: ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’.

While prevention is focused primarily through whole of population strategies and universally available and accessed services (eg education and health), it is supported by links to secondary services where greater intensity of support is needed. The aim is, in part, to lower the stigma of seeking help.

Quoting the Marmot review of the social determinants of health inequalities in the UK (*Fair Society Healthy Lives*, published in February 2010) Professor Higgins noted that:

- actions must be “proportionate to the degree

of disadvantage, and hence applied in some degree to all people, rather than applied solely to the most disadvantaged”.

- universal services provide the platform for the ramping up or integration of services that would then be classified as “targeted”
- policies that improve family access to services and supports that reduce stressors related to poverty, addiction and ill health will assist with prevention of child maltreatment
- the broader availability of such whole-of-population strategies also helps with early identification of families ‘at risk’ or in need of additional supports.

The messages for service providers included the following:

- Public-health approaches can be applied to the promotion of safe and supportive family environments across a range of universal platforms
- Problematic family environments can be readily identified
- Children’s family environments can change – and when they improve, wellbeing improves
- Target behaviour (parental family dynamics) rather than people based on socio-demographic characteristics
- Recognise that families can change for the better.



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- Stretch a Family
- Settlement Services International
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