

# HEAR OUR VOICE!

On 8<sup>th</sup> July 2015, CREATE held the inaugural *Hear Our Voice* forum, featuring a panel of 7 young people with a care experience. The aim of the event was to give young people a voice and provide a space to share their experiences and ideas to support caseworkers' practice. Over 60 caseworkers, government staff, peak body stakeholders and youth workers attended to listen to topics chosen by the speakers including: building relationships with young people, good casework practice and barriers to participation.

## Key Themes from the Day

### Friendship

- Be authentic, genuine and real.
- Be a friend- make young people feel wanted, cared for (e.g. giving presents) and reassure them that everything will be okay during scary times like changing placements.
- Young people are more inclined to want to engage with caseworkers if they are informal, relaxed and do something fun together.

### Have common interests

- A genuine relationship can be built with a young person by sharing common interests- this can be TV shows, movies, music, sports.

### Listen

- Young people know their needs best and can make their own decisions.
- Listen to the young person about their views on changing schools, going to a new placement or whether they want to see a counsellor.
- Seek the young person's opinion and views about EVERYTHING!

### Time & Stability

- Spend time with young people; it all comes down to the relationship!
- Explain if you change jobs so young people don't think it's their fault.
- Young people need stable caseworkers who know them well so they are better supported.

### Support and encourage

- The best caseworkers are there for the young person consistently.
- Encourage young people in their endeavours and dreams.
- Explain to young people that they can call their caseworker if they're having a bad day, need to talk or need advice about the carer.
- Young people require ongoing support beyond 18 years old.
- Support young people around their worries of reuniting with their biological family after leaving care.

### Be role-models

- Caseworkers are like mentors as they know the young people well and help them get through life.
- Young people look up to caseworkers as role-models so they are very important in influencing their lives.

## Respect Our Boundaries

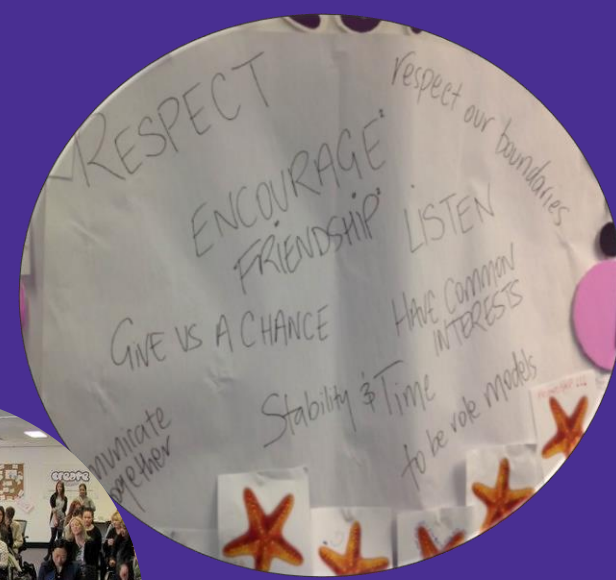
- Respect young people's right to privacy and their wish to not disclose everything about their personal lives such as friendships & relationships.
- Respect that young people may not want to be asked about their past.
- Give young people time to heal from heartbreak, especially when first entering care.
- Give young people space to process their emotions and experiences. Don't make assumptions about how they are feeling. Offer support and allow time for young people to respond when they are ready.
- Respect each young person's preference for how frequently they want to see their caseworker.

## Communicate Together

- Young people have the right to know EVERYTHING that has happened in their lives from birth – they should be able to access their files, have a copy of their records and know why they are in care.
- Don't lie to young people about why they are in care or how long it will take to access their file. For young people "knowing (my) past gives (me) freedom...I don't want to be like my parents, I want to be the one that breaks the cycle".
- Help young people feel less anxious when moving to a new placement by arranging a meeting with and providing information on prospective carers such as: their daily routine, their pets, interests, family members, the neighbourhood and rooms in the house.
- Include young people when arranging meeting with carers.

## Give us a chance

- It is NEVER the young person's fault that they are in care.
- Young people may push caseworkers away because they are used to not having anyone who cares; it takes time to build trust.
- Young people can become shy, withdrawn or shut off when triggered. Don't take this personally, be sensitive to young people's trauma.
- Young people can 'stuff up' now and then but that's how they learn and become better people.



## Take Home Messages

- ✓ Be a friend
- ✓ Listen and ask
- ✓ Spend time together
- ✓ Be a role-model
- ✓ Support and encourage
- ✓ Respect boundaries
- ✓ Communicate
- ✓ Provide information
- ✓ Give young people a chance
- ✓ Continue support after transitioning from care

# YOUNG PEOPLE CHANGING THE OUT-OF-HOME CARE SYSTEM.

## Recommendations for the OOHC System

The *Hear Our Voice* forum provides a rich source of information to inform broader changes in the Out-Of-Home-Care system to reflect the needs and views of young people in care.

### Recommendations:

1. Address high turn-over rates for caseworkers to create more stability and capacity to spend time with young people
2. Establish a system where young people can access information and have more ways to participate in decision-making
3. Remove barriers to enable young people to access their file, personal information and understand their history. (E.g. Provide youth-friendly information on how and when young people can access their file and be supported in this process)
4. Establish a system which enables young people to meet carers and have information before moving placements
5. Extend support to young people in care to 25 years old

## Things YOU are changing about your practice

At the beginning of the event, a metaphor was introduced: *As the old man walked on the beach at dawn, he noticed a young man ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them into the sea. Finally, catching up to the youth, he asked why he was doing this. The answer was that the stranded starfish would die if left in the morning sun. "But the beach goes on for miles and there are millions of starfish. How can your effort make a difference?" asked the old man. The young man looked at the starfish in his hand and placed it safely in the waves. "It makes a difference to this one." he said.*

At the end of the event, attendees were given a starfish and asked to write what they would do differently to help young people 'back into the water safely'.

### You told us YOU will:

- Take time to get to know the young person
- Spend more time together
- LISTEN to young people
- Be a FRIEND and have fun!
- Be yourself so young people can be themselves
- Ask and respect what young people want and need and what works for them
- Be honest and truthful
- Support, care, be there and show young people they are important
- Give information, explain and INVOLVE young people in EVERYTHING – including placements, carers, their future, staff changes & why they are in care
- Ensure young people remain connected to their culture
- Provide stability for young people

