



# CREATE Position Paper

## Issue: Stigma in Out-of-Home Care

### CREATE's Position

The stigma that children and young people in out-of-home care report they experience reinforces the fact that they are among the most vulnerable groups in our society. Young people who have lived in care often experience significantly reduced life outcomes compared with their peers who do not have a care history (McDowall, 2009, 2011, 2013).

CREATE believes children and young people, with a care experience, need equal access to services, to be treated fairly without judgement, to feel connected and accepted by the community, and to enjoy the same opportunities and life as every other child and young person in Australia.

**Table 1**

***National Standards that Relate to Stigma in Out-of-Home Care (FaHCSIA, 2011)***

National Standards	Measures
8. Children and young people in care are supported to participate in social and/or recreational activities of their choice, such as sporting, cultural or community activity.	8.1 The proportion of children and young people who report they may choose to do the same sorts of things (sporting, cultural or community activities) that children and young people their age who aren't in care do.
10. Children and young people in care are supported to develop their identity, safely and appropriately, through contact with their families, friends, culture, spiritual sources and communities and have their life history recorded as they grow up.	10.2 The proportion of children (as age-appropriate) and young people who demonstrate having a sense of connection with the community in which they live.

### Evidence

- In 2014–15, there were 43,399 children and young people in out-of-home care across Australia (AIHW, 2016). The issue of stigma, as experienced by children and young people in care, has been a problem for care-leavers for many years (Michell, 2015).
- The effects of stigma on children and young people with a care experience can be seen from early years through to when they leave care, and possibly beyond. These include feeling bullied, excluded, and treated differently from their peers (CREATE, 2006).
- Expectations of children and young people in care are lower than for mainstream children, and achieving poor outcomes can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, enhancing the negative perceptions associated with stigma. An example of this marginalisation occurs in educational expectations of young people “whereby (t)he soft bigotry of low expectations is omnipresent for care leavers” (Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha, & Luckman, 2015, p. 2).
- Children and young people in care experience, they are often reluctant to seek specialist services or to actively ask about their entitlements because they feel there is a stigma associated with what they describe as a “cap in hand approach” (McDowall, 2009, p. 73).
- As Denzel and MacDonald (2014) determined in their empirical study, children and young people in care are likely to be perceived as (a) more emotionally fragile; (b) less self-assured; (c) more likely to engage in petty theft; (d) less likely to have job security; (e) more likely to live in poverty; (f) more likely to be in jail; (g) more likely to have a mental illness; (h) more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol; (i) less likely to have a steady girlfriend or to have a successful marriage.
- Other research (e.g., Blythe, Halcomb, Wilkes, & Jackson, 2012) shows that carers also can experience the stereotypic, negative perceptions associated with out-of-home care.

## Actions

CREATE believes that children and young people in out of home care should have the same opportunities as any other children or young person in the community. Experiencing stigma solely because of being placed into out-of-home care means that children and young people in care are not treated with the same respect as their peers in the general community; it appears little has changed over many years in this regard.

CREATE calls on federal, state and territory ministers with responsibility for child protection to develop strategies that enhance access and opportunities for children and young people in care, that are afforded to all children and young people to reduce the stigma experienced by children and young people in care.

CREATE will advocate for state and territory governments to ensure that:

1. Children and young people who live in out-of-home care are not subjected to stigmatising and stereotyping treatment and language. This will require the development of focussed policy and practice guidelines for action within the sector, and strategies for educating the public and raising awareness of the consequences for the children and young people of undeserved negative perceptions. One way to effect this change will be to present stories in the media that emphasise positive outcomes for children and young people.
2. Resources are developed to enhance the public understanding of the stigma faced by children and young people in care. CREATE has produced a poster and video to address these issues, and CREATE calls on all state and federal governments to support such initiatives to assist children and young people in care.
3. Policies and practices that are developed are influenced by the views of the children and young people currently and previously living in out-of-home care, and that children and young people are included in decision-making processes.

## References

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