

Position Paper 16: Relationship with Caseworkers

CREATE's Position

CREATE believes a strong, trusting relationship with caseworkers is essential to ensure the voices of children and young people in out-of-home care are heard and acted upon. Relationship building requires stability to develop trust and understanding between the caseworker and the child/young person. Achieving this connection requires caseworkers who are honest, caring, flexible, respectful, organised, committed to child-friendly practice, and treat children and young people as individuals with rights that must be respected.

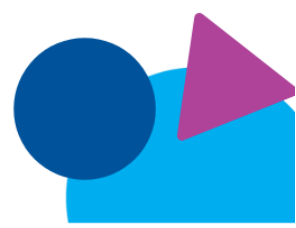
Evidence

- Caseworkers are instrumental in the development and maintenance of children and young people's case plans. The outcomes of these plans relate to *National Standards for out of home care* (FaHCSIA, 2011) in particular standards 1, 2, 4, 5, 11 and 15 pertaining to stability and security; participation in decision making; health, education needs; identification of significant others; sibling contact arrangements; and transition from care planning.
- Best practice sources cite that caseworkers play an important role in the overall wellbeing of young people in their care (Kolivoski et al., 2016; McLeod, 2010; Ridley et al., 2016) and that such wellbeing hinges on establishing and maintaining positive, trusting, kind, and supportive relationships (McDowall, 2018; Oliver & Charles, 2016; Petrocchi et al., 2018; Stabler et al., 2020).
- Research conducted nationally with 1275 children and young people in care (McDowall, 2018), found:
 - Children and young people experience multiple changes in caseworkers (average 5–6), with an acceptable variety of support, which impacts on their ability to form relationships.
 - Over one third felt their caseworkers were not adequately accessible when they needed to make contact; young people in residential care had particular issues in contacting their caseworker.
 - On average, caseworkers scored 63 out of 100 for helpfulness, with young people rating their interacting with caseworkers at 64 out of 100. Clearly, improvements can be made in these areas.
- When asked to describe what makes a good caseworker, young people want someone who listens to them, makes time for their needs (such as visiting often), assists practically with issues such as family contact and school, and is friendly and responsive as well as communicative with information.
- Stabler et al. (2020) caution that there is no one type of “good social worker”, specific children require specific skills at specific times. There are, however, recognised qualities, skills, practices, philosophies, attitudes, and actions that engender more positive experiences and meaningful connections. These include flexibility, trust, honesty, active listening, empathy, kindness, respect, helpfulness, stability, consistency, continuity, directness, responsiveness, genuine interest, commitment, punctuality, organisation, advocacy, child-friendly practice, a willingness to take action, and treating young people as individuals with rights (McDowall, 2018; Petrocchi et al., 2018; Ridley et al., 2013; Stabler et al., 2020).

Actions

State and territory governments are aware of their responsibility to ensure children and young people in out of home care have access to qualified and trauma informed caseworkers to are committed to child safe practices and treat children and young people as individuals whose rights must be respected. In this context, CREATE specifically advocates for the following:

1. All governments undertake to employ adequate numbers of qualified staff to meet current and future demands of the child protection system.
2. All organisations involved in caring for children and young people in out-of-home care:
 - » Provide ongoing staff training (e.g., trauma-informed training, compassion training, cultural training, and other skills training, including reflective practice).
 - » Consider matching young people with caseworkers to maximise the likelihood of positive relationships forming with professionals.



Position Paper 16: Relationship with Caseworkers

- » Establish procedures for incoming and outgoing caseworkers (e.g., explain to the young person what is happening, why changes are occurring, organise introductions, and allowing time for hand-overs and farewells) to ensure the smooth transition of service staff and continuation of support.
 - » Establish best practice review processes to regularly monitor the outcomes and relationship factors with caseworkers. Children and young people's input should be included in this process to provide feedback as to the effectiveness and responsiveness of services.
3. All organisations involved in child protection to ensure their caseworkers are supported to:
- » Treat children and young people as individuals and modify and personalise plans to suit the unique circumstances of the young person. Ask young people what they need, how they feel, and how they would like to be supported by their caseworker.
 - » Maintain regular (and positive) communication and contact, using age-appropriate and culturally sensitive language that shows respect for young people, particularly those who have disabilities and other diverse needs.
 - » Interact with the young person's broader relational and social networks (e.g., foster family, biological family, kin, and community). This connection is critical with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island young people, and caseworkers must consider their role in providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island young people with opportunities to either establish or maintain connection to their extended familial and cultural networks.

References

- Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). (2011). *An Outline of National Standards for out-of-home care*. Commonwealth of Australia.
- Kolivoski, K.M., Shook, J.J., Johnson, H.C., Goodkind, S., Fusco, R., DeLisi, M., & Vaughn, M.G. (2016). Applying legal socialization to the child welfare system: Do youths' perceptions of caseworkers matter? *Child Youth Care Forum*, 45, 65–83. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-015-9317-y>
- McDowall, J. J. (2018). *Out-of-home care in Australia: Children and young people's views after five years of National Standards*. CREATE Foundation.
- McLeod, A. (2010). 'A friend and an equal': Do young people in care seek the impossible from their social workers? *The British Journal of Social Work*, 40(3), 772–788. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcn143>
- Oliver, C., & Charles, G. (2016). Enacting firm, fair and friendly practice: A model for strengths-based child protection relationships? *British Journal of Social Work*, 46, 1009–1026. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcv015>
- Petrocchi, S., Rotenberg, K.J., Levante, A., & Lecciso, F. (2018). Children's trust in social workers: Scale development and relations to children's engagement with social workers. *Child & Family Social Work*, 23, 239–247. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12410>
- Ridley, J., Larkins, C., Farrelly, N., Hussein, S., Austerberry, H., Manthorpe, J., & Stanley, N. (2016). Investing in the relationship: Practitioners' relationships with looked-after children and care leavers in social work practices. *Child & Family Social Work*, 21(1), 55–64. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12109>
- Stabler, L., Wilkins, D., & Carro, H. (2020). What do children think about their social worker? A Q-method study of children's services. *Child & Family Social Work*, 25, 118–126. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12665>

