

CREATE's Position

Residential care refers to out-of-home care provided in a designated facility by staff employed to support children and young people in that residence. Children and young people often are placed in residential care after other placement options have been exhausted, meaning that this cohort requires special care to address the initial and continuing trauma they experience. CREATE recognises that this type of support is necessary and acknowledges the role residential care plays within the care system. However, treatment of children and young people within these facilities should still be based on what would be in their best interests, as applies elsewhere in the care system.

Residential care should provide an opportunity for the young people to address issues of autonomy and control, relationship support, safety and security, and transition to adulthood (Cameron-Mathiassen et al., 2022). The chosen facility should be as close to a “home like” environment as possible, with areas residents can personalise and in which they can have privacy.

A recent development in Australia involves the establishment of Therapeutic Residential Care that provides therapeutic input tailored to young peoples' needs. Such support should be extended.

Staff must be highly trained and able to respond to, and work with children and young people who can exhibit challenging behaviour as an expression of the trauma they have experienced. This is one of the most difficult areas in which practitioners can operate in out-of-home care and needs sensitive, suitably qualified workers.

There are certain principles that CREATE believes need to be at the centre of the residential care system. They are that children and young people:

- be provided with stability and security while in care;
- participate in decisions that impact on their lives;
- participate in social and/or recreational activities of their choice (e.g., sporting and cultural pursuits);
- be supported to work towards their goals in education, training, employment, and connection to culture and community (particularly for First Nation's young people);
- are supported to safely and appropriately maintain connection with family, including birth parents, siblings, or other family members;
- are not placed at greater disadvantage through unnecessary criminalisation of their behaviour.

These principles were a key part of the *National Framework 2009–2020*. CREATE expects to see these principles retained in the new framework *Safe and Supported 2021–2031* that currently is being developed.

CREATE advocates that all states (as in the QLD and VIC models) provide support for those who have lived in residential facilities when extending their care to 21 years. This could take the form of financial support and/or supported accommodation or housing assistance.

Evidence

- Nationally, residential care comprises 7.6% of the care population. Large variations exist across Australia in its use, (e.g., from 3.6% in NSW to around 15% in QLD and SA). Costs for these services range from 8X (SA) to 18X (WA) the expenditure on home-based care (AIHW, 2022; Productivity Commission, 2022).
- CREATE's national survey of out-of-home care (McDowall, 2018) found that children and young people in residential care experienced more instability than those in home-based care and only 69% felt safe and secure in their residential placement compared with 93% in foster or kinship care.
- McDowall (2020) reported that young people who have experienced residential care in Australia are less likely, compared with those in home-based placements, to complete year 12 education (41% vs. 67%), and were more likely to be involved with youth justice (56% vs. 25%). Care-criminalisation in residential placements must be avoided (McFarlane, 2016).
- Residential care could be seen as an opportunity to provide specialist evidenced-based, trauma-informed services to particularly vulnerable young people, e.g., the Sanctuary and CARE models. A recent review (McLean, 2018) of such therapeutic approaches encouraged the extension of these services that were tailored to individual needs, involved relationship-based support and provided for connection to family and culture to facilitate healing (see also Gatwiri et al., 2020; McNamara, 2020).
- Moore et al. (2018) focused on identifying the key characteristics staff in this field needed to possess to achieve a positive “worker-client alliance.” They stressed that an effective worker should be: caring, proactive, tenacious in building relationships, and available.
- Children and young people in residential care have been found to be well aware of their rights within the

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child protection system and were more likely to have made a complaint than their home-based peers. However, many did not speak up for fear of negative consequences (McDowall, 2018). It is essential that children and young people in residential care are encouraged and supported to participate in decision-making in their facilities and to have their voice respected (Vosz et al., 2020).

Actions

CREATE believes that residential care models, practices and staff recruitment and training require attention and reform to be suitable as a therapeutic, safe and secure placement option for children and young people in out-of-home care. Although CREATE acknowledges that residential care in states and territories will continue to operate as a placement option within the OOH system, CREATE will continue to advocate for the following outcomes.

1. Targeted strategies need to be employed to improve residential care models and placement options for children and young people that align with the overarching principles of the new National Framework *Safe and Supported 2021–2031* and provide evidence of best practice;
2. High quality, trauma-informed, and culturally safe care must be provided to children and young people in a nurturing environment by appropriately trained staff that responds to the individual needs of children and young people in out-of-home care. This includes considering a therapeutic model for residential care that has seen success within Australia and in many jurisdictions around the world.
3. Residential staff need to be highly trained to acquire the varied skills required for managing challenging behaviours. They must be trauma-informed and have a sound knowledge of conflict resolution and the application of diversionary strategies. Having staff who can confidently apply these approaches in a caring and supportive way, while respecting relationships, should assist in decriminalising the residential-care experience.
4. Young people in residential care must be given opportunities to participate in decision-making affecting their lives. Their views must be considered and respected, and they must have confidence to raise issues safely.
5. Particular attention should be given to ensuring that the educational outcomes of those in residential care are not worse than what is found in other out-of-home care

placements. This could involve monitoring and assisting with school attendance.

6. Residential facilities should be built and maintained to a high standard, to provide a safe and personalised home for the children and young people who live there.

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