



**“The Most Enduring of Relationships”**  
Engaging Families who have  
Children in Substitute Care

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**SUMMARY**

This presentation reports on a research project undertaken in 2003 to explore the importance of engaging the families of children and young people who are in care.

The research consisted of three parts: a literature review and report; interviews with children, young people and families; and interviews with practitioners.

The aim of the report was to highlight the importance of engaging families and to develop guidelines for good practice in this area. The research found overwhelming evidence for the value of engaging families, but also found that engagement can be a complex process which requires a strong long-term commitment, positive attitude, and great sensitivity, especially to issues of grief and loss.

Engagement does not necessarily mean access or contact. Given the wishes of the children and young people, or protective concerns, contact between children and their families may not be immediately appropriate. This does not mean, however, that the family cannot be engaged.

Family engagement means more than formal consultation. Parents need to be respected and their own issues of grief and loss understood. Workers and carers must also have a belief in the value of engaging families for better outcomes for children and young people.

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Given the clear benefits of family engagement, resources should be made available to allow for the development of relationships with families whose children are in care.

The full report is available from MacKillop Family Services Practice and Policy Unit.

### *What My Family Means To Me*

*Families are like fingerprints  
They are our identity*

*Families are like myths and legends  
They enrich our cultural knowledge*

*Families are the road signs  
They direct us to the correct paths in life*

*Families are like bricks  
Building a secure wall of society*

*Families are like cuddles  
The arms of safety and security*

*Families are like friends  
They help people in times of crisis*

*Families are like shadows  
They are always there whenever you need them*

*Families are irreplaceable*

Year 8 Girl<sup>1</sup>

*It is gut wrenching, it's like having your heart ripped out of your chest and thrown. The day that I had my two boys taken from me I just could not do anything – I had DHS sitting there with a copper in civvy uniform writing every detail down on paper and she's looking at me as if I was the criminal and I did wrong – how can you judge a person who has tried so flaming hard to look after his two boys. I must admit it was bloody hard – you try to look after two siblings, you try to do your housework, to try to do this, you try to get sleep – it doesn't work – it does work but in the end it destroys your mental capacity....*

A parent

### **Summary of best practice**

The interviews with parents, children/young people and practitioners produced a number of common themes that reflect best practice in engaging and developing positive working relationships with families to achieve best outcomes for children and young people in substitute care.

- Best practice highlights the need for workers and carers to believe in the importance of natural families and their involvement with their children for better outcomes. The way foster care is viewed by practitioners and the community in general is important to consider. The negative connotations associated with foster care and the families who use the service need to be shifted. In a system where the focus is on the failure of parents to be able to appropriately parent their children it is important that the positives are highlighted and achievements celebrated.

<sup>1</sup> Families Australia, *Bulletin No 3*, Winter 2003.

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- There are important principles of attitude: respect, trust, honesty, empathy, having positive regard, being non-judgmental.
- Parents must have the opportunity to be actively involved with their children and this engagement is to be encouraged and valued. Engagement need not always mean access, particularly where there are protective issues.
- Providing information and regular feedback to parents about what is happening with their child is essential. This should involve regular contact with the practitioner and through reports. Reports must be accessible to parents and the language used should not exclude them.
- Parents need to be active partners in decision making, where negotiation and compromise are part of the process. The child or young person must also be involved, where possible, in the decision making, and their views incorporated into the process.
- Practitioners need to be available and accessible to families, along with being supportive and friendly. The value of having consistent workers has been demonstrated, though this is acknowledged as often difficult to achieve in the current climate of the substitute care system.
- Parents, children and young people need to have a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities of those involved and there need to be clear channels of communication.
- The important work of engaging families and developing positive working relationships will be more easily achieved if practitioners have a clearer understanding of the parent’s situation and the emotional impact of having a child removed.
- Working with loss and grief is a major part of practice in substitute care.
- Best practice would be further enhanced and better outcomes would result if families and practitioners were better resourced.

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