

# **“The Most Enduring of Relationships”**

## **Engaging Families who have Children in Substitute Care**



**Terri Scott / John Honner**



# What My Family Means To Me

*Families are like fingerprints*

*They are our identity*

*Families are like shadows*

*They are always there whenever you need them*

*Families are irreplaceable*

Year 8 Girl,

Families Australia, *Bulletin No 3*, Winter 2003



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# 1. Context

- In a substitute care system where multiple placements are a common feature, the importance of family connections becomes clear: ‘for many children in care experiencing multiple placements the family of origin is frequently the most enduring of relationships’.

Sultmann and Testro

- ‘...making a decision to remove a child from his or her birth parents should never involve terminating the right of the child and birth family to maintain a continuing relationship.’

O’Neill



## **2. Findings from Literature Review**

- **Why is engaging families important?**
- **Better placement outcomes**
- **Consistency/stability/attachment**
- **Reunification**
- **Identity**
- **Life books, family and identity**
- **Connections with social networks, community and culture**
- **Leaving care and coming home**
- **Arguments against engaging families**



# Research Conclusion

Family connection for children and young people in care is a key to

- better placement outcomes, including consistency, stability, resilience,
- identity development,
- and young people seeking to return to family post placement.



## 2. Findings from Interviews


- **Parents** valued being part of the research project
- They valued being trusted and being involved with their children's development

*“It is important to know what is going on with my girls – you don’t just give birth to your children and then forget about them when they are no longer with you – it is nice to be involved.”*



- Grief and loss were very strong factors in parents' behaviour and attitudes and needed to be engaged.

*“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 – 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....”*



- **Children** highlighted importance of family connections. On being asked about the role of the worker, one child stated *‘to take us to see our mum and dad’*.
- The children and the young person were clear that maintaining contact with their family members was very important to them and a necessary part of the work done with them by MacKillop Family Services.



## Practitioners' perspectives

- Relationship building: respect
- Stability of practitioners and Child Protection workers
- Understanding the parent's situation
- Consultation and decision making – partnership with families
- Attitudes and beliefs of practitioners and foster carers
- Advocacy and resources



## 4. Summary of Best Practice

- need for workers and carers to believe
- important principles of attitude
- engagement to be encouraged and valued
- provide information and feedback
- active partners in decision making



- available and accessible to families
- a clear understanding of roles
- understanding of the parent's situation
- working with loss and grief
- better resourced

