



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

—
Research Centre
for Children and
Families

Child & Family Workforce Skills Strategy- Executive Summary

Introduction

The Association for Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA), NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), AbSec and FAMS, have commissioned the University of Sydney, Research Centre for Children and Families, in partnership with Curijo, the Parenting Research Centre (PRC), and Charles Sturt University, to develop a Child and Family Workforce Skills Strategy. The aim is to provide a platform for consistency in the quality and content of training, as well as address issues for workforce training delivery and portability across the sector.

Purpose

- **Identify** the knowledge, attributes and skills required by the NSW child and family social services workforce employed under Permanency Support Program, Intensive Therapeutic Care and Targeted Early Intervention contracts.
- **Develop** strategies for delivering appropriate training and professional development.
- **Advise** on how the sector can collaborate for the delivery of efficient and integrated workforce training.

Background

The Child and Family Welfare Workforce Skills Strategy White Paper has been developed against the backdrop of a rapidly growing demand for community sector workers, in conjunction with a critical workforce shortage across all industries. Attracting and keeping skilled workers is challenging and this report examines the evidence for a way forward.

This White Paper outlines a vision for how this could be achieved using a range of contemporary training and development practices and suggests recommendations for next steps in strengthening the skills, knowledge and practice of the NSW Child and Family Sector.

Consultations were conducted across the child and family services sector, including mainstream, Aboriginal and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse organisations; practitioners; families and young people. Several key themes for action emerged from these extensive consultations. The next step will be the implementation of the target action areas. ACWA is well placed to lead the engagement with agencies and other key stakeholders, to progress the strategy through agreed accountabilities and timeframes for achieving the desired outcomes.

It is acknowledged that an overarching approach should also be able to accommodate the unique local context for services. Therefore, priorities and steps for implementation should be developed in collaboration with key stakeholders across the sector.

STRATEGIES

Workforce policy and planning

Significant reforms across the child and family sector in NSW requires the sector to develop specific approaches, techniques, and strategies for working with parents and carers.

Workforce recruitment and induction

Develop clear, consistent recruitment messages, including realistic job profiles. Use professional marketing techniques to attract people from diverse backgrounds.

Workforce skill and capability development

Identify skills and attributes that are essential for practitioners, and approaches to training that prioritise efficiency and embed learning into practice.

Workforce education and qualifications

Pursue greater consistency in the type and quality of training offered to practitioners, with content aligned to diverse service requirements.

Workforce engagement and resilience

Foster self-care and critical reflection through access to on-the-job support such as coaching, mentoring and supervision.

Workforce cultural safety and sensitivity

Incorporate cultural safety as an ongoing process, involving continuous learning and quality assurance processes across the organisation, with structures for accountability.

Key findings and opportunities

The successful introduction of ambitious sector reforms requires a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce. Practitioners are expected to address a myriad of complex challenges at the family, community, and system levels. Recent reviews, however, indicate that the broader child and family workforce may not be adequately prepared to address such intricate problems.^{1,2} A range of stakeholders, including young people, families, foster carers and sector professionals have also expressed that child protection workers often lack the ability to provide them the support they need.³

Surveys of the workforce indicate a strong desire for better training, particularly in areas such as: working with Aboriginal families; supporting family restoration; working with a trauma-informed approach; and undertaking legal processes.^{4,5}

There is evidence that practitioners are not coming into the sector with, or acquiring in a timely manner, the skills and knowledge they need. In 2017, ACWA identified that wide-ranging changes were needed across the child protection and out-of-home care sector to support the implementation of the NSW Permanency Support Program (PSP).⁶ Under PSP, funded out-of-home care services were required to progress permanency goals for children determined by the Children's Court. Practitioners needed specific approaches, techniques and strategies to engage with parents and carers to achieve these permanency goals. Enabling the workforce to develop these skills and capabilities involves major changes to the current training environment, which has been found to be fragmented, resource intensive and highly specialised.

There was strong consensus across the NGO sector that agencies needed support to develop the practice-related skills to meet the challenges of this changed service environment. Agencies reported that staff lacked an understanding of the PSP program and what it meant for their day-to-day practice. Their recommendations included offering joint training initiatives and expert guidance (with DCJ), along with other modes of on-the-job support such as coaching, mentoring, and group-based learning. Localised communities of practice were also recommended to provide a mechanism for discussion of permanency issues.

A key finding of the White Paper is the role that agency leaders play in developing capabilities for using evidence-informed training via proactive planning, investment in support structures and maintaining relationships critical for effective implementation.⁷ Moreover, supervision and on-the-job coaching can help foster a positive learning culture.⁸ Embedding learning into practice, and offering ongoing support for professional development offers many benefits for the sector, including increased job satisfaction and staff retention.

Recruitment and induction

The child welfare workforce in Australia faces numerous occupational, organisational and socioemotional challenges in their day-to-day work that cumulatively deter practitioners from pursuing a career in child protection and make it difficult for child welfare agencies and departments to recruit qualified staff.⁹

In light of these challenges, research suggests that agencies need to develop a clear, consistent recruitment message; a realistic job profile; use professional marketing techniques to positively influence public perceptions about child and family welfare work; and increase employee benefits.¹⁰

Workforce consultation participants emphasised the importance of sharing accurate and precise information about the day-to-day duties of child and family sector roles during recruitment processes. This includes ensuring that job descriptions are reflective of the tasks required to perform a role and having transparent conversations with job candidates about the proportion of time that would be spent on each task. For example, clearer messaging about the volume of administrative duties and proportion of time spent with children and families associated with casework roles.

Another challenge for the sector is the lack of consistency and standards for inducting staff into the workplace. The initial onboarding period can provide a valuable opportunity to impart the values of the organisation and prepare new recruits for their role, including support programs and staff to equip them for practice.

Recommendations

- ACWA leads the implementation of the strategy and key action areas in collaboration with the sector.
- Involve key government agencies, peak organisations, industry, and unions representing the workforce.
- Set out the responsibilities, timeframes, and performance indicators for the implementation of the action areas identified as priorities by the sector.
- Develop position description templates, based on standardised core competencies for key roles. Incorporating the personal attributes needed, such as active listening, empathy, communication skills.

It's about talking to your staff and getting really right down to what it is that they think they've been employed for.... They didn't know it was gonna be admin. A lot of our workers have said that they didn't realise they weren't gonna be so hands on with the kids for more than an hour or two hours a month...you have to say 'this is what it looks like. Is it something that you want?' And have them say 'well actually it's not what I was looking for, [it] was more youth work I was looking for. Really knuckling down on what they wanna do. So, it comes back to the recruitment process. Child & Family Services Manager, Sector focus group

Skill and capability development

The NSW Practice Standards emphasise the importance of critical reflection for improving service outcomes, including the use of group and individual supervision as a component of good practice.¹¹ Overall, it is important that child welfare agencies recognise the need to foster an organisational culture characterised by a climate of support and holding shared risk.¹²

There is limited evidence to definitively identify the skills most needed to best help families. However, conclusions can be drawn about what works to support children and families from a recent review of evidence for practices designed to support permanency outcomes for young people.¹³ The range of practices common to the most effective programs include:

- supporting parents and carers to encourage prosocial behaviours in their children
- providing clear guidance regarding skills for parents to practice
- assisting parents to problem solve in relation to their children's behaviour and providing parents with positive feedback and affirmation around good instances of parenting
- modelling supportive interactions with the young people
- undertaking motivational interviewing in order to build rapport with parents and their incentive to strengthen their relationship with their children
- regularly undertaking audits of children's behaviours and challenges experienced by the parents or carers
- guiding positive play experiences; roleplaying to help illustrate such matters as how families can draw on their strengths
- facilitating contact with a therapist.¹⁴

The broad conclusion of this study is that children are best protected from moving into care where parents are supported to change their behaviour and develop a range of new parenting skills. Reunification is best achieved through a combination of helping parents institute new behaviours and ensuring that parents have access to multidisciplinary support. Human skills or 'soft skills' such as emotional intelligence, resilience, communication, empathy and self-awareness were also frequently identified across workforce consultations as necessary skills for working in the child and family sector.

Proficiency in report writing, time management and organisation were also crucial given increased reporting requirements in the sector and identified administrative tasks as a common challenge for workers.

Education and qualifications

There is no accepted sector-wide framework for professional skills and competencies. Tertiary child protection workforces are predominantly degree qualified. Currently, the preferred degrees are Human Services, Social Work and Psychology. The challenge is the identification of courses most aligned with desired workforce competencies and supplementary trainings for role-specific skill development.¹⁶

Mapping was conducted of the range of educational offering available to the workforce across tertiary, vocational, and private training providers. A total of 12 Universities and Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) were identified relevant to the sector, including 58 courses. Some courses were found to be more aligned to the child and family sector than others, for example, the Bachelor of Human Services with a Child, Youth and Family Practice specialisation, with core units and elective units specific to child, youth, and family practice settings. Social work courses could better align with industry requirements if further child and family specialisation was provided for in the courses.

The principles of adult learning should underpin professional development, that is, professionals should be active participants in the learning process, and be connected to their experience and role. Information giving should be combined with demonstrations, practice and feedback.¹⁷ Learning occurs when reflective practice and learning cultures work together, recognising that research and theory also needs 'practice wisdom' to keep pace with the constantly evolving nature of child and family work.¹⁸ The balance between qualifications and skills includes the recognition of transferable skills, knowledge and experience across the sector.¹⁹

Effective child protection practice models

A systematic review of effective practice models found that the greatest amount of evidence related to:

- systemic family therapy approaches, including knowing how to help families disrupt negative behavioural patterns and dynamics.
- being able to help parents identify their strengths and develop new strategies for approaching challenging situations and helping families to set goals and move towards them in a scaled or manageable way.¹⁵

"How to have difficult conversations 'cause our work is around difficult conversations every day and going back to the qualifications and new grads and all of those types of things, even younger staff, without as much life experience, I think it's so difficult for them to feel uncomfortable in conversation... And I think part of that is acknowledging how uncomfortable that feels and how to do it in a really clear and kind way, but also having some emotional intelligence around how that's delivered."

Engagement and resilience

There is a need for both interpersonal and organisation-level supports. At the interpersonal level, peer support and cohesive teams can supply practical assistance and help protect against the negative effects of work-related stressors. At the organisation level, leadership, supervisory support, role clarity, workforce training and caseload management can alleviate stress experienced on the job. Organisation-level changes are also needed for improving staff retention, including decreased workload, increased compensation, ongoing professional development, competent and engaged leadership, and improved organisational culture.²⁰

Labour shortages and high-turnover rates are a feature of the care economy and its sub-sectors. There is good evidence that on-the-job support, such as coaching and mentoring, can contribute to job satisfaction and worker retention. Regular supervision, organisational supports and self-efficacy have been identified as predictors of practitioner intention to stay in the child and family sector. Ongoing professional support, such as coaching and mentoring, provides workers with opportunities to reflect on their progress, refine their way of working, and build occupational resilience. Coaching and mentoring also help workers to apply the skills learnt from training to their daily practice.

Coaching and supervision can be offered as an individual or team-based program. For coaching and other forms of on-the-job support to be effective, it needs to have a clarity of purpose, with monitoring of progress achieved. This requires team managers, or external coaches, to be skilled and well-versed in the coaching model being utilised.

Training in self-care is an avenue by which practitioners may protect themselves against the deleterious effects of exposure to trauma. Self-care is broadly defined as “the practice of taking action to preserve or improve one’s own health” including “wellbeing and happiness, in particular during periods of stress”.²¹ While self-care alone will not ameliorate work-related trauma and stress,²² fostering self-care in concert with supervision, mentoring and supports can lessen the impact of work-related trauma.

There is a need to invest in both building the self-care capabilities of new staff through training and education opportunities. The importance of supporting staff to practice self-care on an ongoing basis through mentorship and supervision was consistently identified across workforce consultations. Participants drew attention to the high levels of trauma involved in child and family work, and how this could impact the wellbeing of practitioners. Developing skills in self-care, including maintaining professional boundaries and being aware of one’s own emotional capacity and needs, was viewed as a strategy for preventing vicarious trauma and burnout.

Culturally safety and sensitivity

Given the diverse population in Australia, it is important that linguistically and culturally competent and diverse staff make up the child and family welfare workforce. Despite the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across the child and family welfare sector, nationally only 2.3% of the welfare workforce identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in 2020.²³

Recruitment strategies that prioritise linguistic and cultural diversity are needed. Strategies for diverse recruitment must also recognise and compensate for disparities in access to formal qualifications. When agencies are unable to retain Aboriginal staff, it may have future impacts on the recruitment of new Aboriginal staff if organisations come to be seen in the community as a non-preferred employer of Aboriginal people.²⁴ Aboriginal staff often report that, as well as managing their full caseloads, there is also an expectation that they act as cultural advisors to their co-workers and conduct community engagements.

Access to highly skilled Aboriginal mentors is limited, requiring organisations to explore alternative mentoring models.²⁵ For example, remote mentoring through web-based video-conferencing platforms can enable Aboriginal staff to access external Indigenous mentors within their extended community. A dual model of

“There needs to be a skill set that’s very much developed through, you know, strong education, ongoing coaching rather than you know, going off to training sessions.”

“It’s the supervision, it’s the mentoring, it’s the reflective practice space. If we’re not going to do that bit, then it’s kind of pointless doing a whole new qualification.” Child & Family Services Manager, Sector focus group

“There’s a lot of the funding contracts don’t actually have space for supervision embedded within it. So, there’s no core funding or there’s very limited core funding. So that when it comes to things like supervision and of those other elements of training workers and supporting them appropriately isn’t factored into the wider system. And I think that’s a key concern. If you’re gonna do workforce skills strategy, you might need to embed funding for that within the contracts as they get recommissioned.” Child & Family Services Manager, Sector focus group

*When working with Aboriginal practitioners, learning and support strategies can be viewed through the lens of the ‘**8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning**’, developed by Aboriginal elders in north-western NSW communities with Tyson Yunkaporta”.²⁹*

supervision, can provide opportunities to reflect and model clinical skills with an experienced staff, together with an Indigenous mentor, to reflect on their cultural obligations, and the impact this had on their professional duties, and their personal mental health and wellbeing.

Cultural supervision, peer supervision and mentoring are recommended as workforce development strategies for the recruitment, retention and upskilling of staff. Strategies include a designated mentor for new Aboriginal workers to encourage skill-building and confidence while also offering support during the induction process. Cultural supervision can support Aboriginal workers in understanding their cultural obligations and the blurred lines between community and work obligations.²⁶

Cultural safety involves the positive recognition and celebration of cultures, empowering people to contribute and feel safe to be themselves. Cultural safety must be applied consistently at all levels of an organisation. This is a strategy to address discrimination and racism that impacts employees, children, and their families and that can lead to a loss of confidence in organisations.²⁷

Cultural peer supervision often occurs amongst colleagues in similar roles. By sharing experiences and establishing professional connections, peer supervision can increase both personal and organisational learning.²⁸ An advantage of this approach is that it supports optimal safety and trust between participants, and it can be empowering to take on the responsibility of this role. External supervisors can be used to equalise the power relationship that happens in line management supervision models, as they can work in collaboration with the clinical supervisor to ensure that cultural supervision needs are being met.

“Programs that are written by Aboriginal peoples for their own communities, you know, there’s some really highly successful ones, but they’re not given any validation and they’re not provided with any support.”

Interview with Aboriginal OOH Service Executive.

Conclusions

Workforce retention and turnover are longstanding issues that impact on the quality and consistency of support services for families. Of equal concern is the lack of diversity among the workforce, given the growing overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and children with a disability, and that 20 per cent of Australia’s population is from a non-English speaking background. This poses the challenge of providing services that are responsive to diverse populations.

The growth of the human service sector has highlighted the difficulties of attracting and retaining a workforce with the skills and competencies required to operate in a complex service environment. The sector is projected to increase by more than 10 per cent by 2025, at the same time that as the current workforce is aging.³⁰ There needs to be active engagement and partnership across the spectrum of the industry, from government, service providers and education, to ensure there is an adequate pipeline of adequately skilled and qualified workers, able to engage with families with complex issues.

While the legislation, policy and service environment have undergone major change in NSW in recent years, many of the core capabilities required of the workforce remain generally unchanged. Articulating these core capabilities, that comprise the knowledge, skills, and attributes that all workers must demonstrate to perform their roles can lead to a common language and shared understanding for workers, employers and training providers. It can provide an agreed foundation to inform the full range of workforce development initiatives, training and qualifications to meet sectors needs and requirements.

The Workforce Skills Strategy aims to articulate the underpinning principles, shared values and attitudes and core elements for a contemporary professional skills and development program. Across the child and family service system, people are the key to delivering positive outcomes. The practitioners, and the capabilities they bring to their role, the children and families whose needs are at the centre of the service system. The Workforce Skills Strategy outlines a series of focus areas to provide a pathway toward retaining a skilled, competent, and diverse workforce, able to adapt to future challenges and needs as they emerge.

For more information

Research Centre for Children and Families

e rccf.research@sydney.edu.au

w <https://www.sydney.edu.au/arts/our-research/centres-institutes-and-groups/research-centre-for-children-and-families.html>



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

In partnership with:



Parenting
Research Centre



Charles Sturt
University

REFERENCES

- ¹ PSP Learning Hub. (n.d.). *Permanency Support Program sector workforce development and training strategy*.
- ² Fernandez, E. (2014) Child Protection and Vulnerable Families: Trends and Issues in the Australian Context. *Social Sciences*, 3:785-808
- ³ Russ, E., Morley, L., Driver, M., Lonne, B., Harries, M., & Higgins, D. (2022). *Trends and needs in the Australian child welfare workforce: An exploratory study*. Canberra: ACU Institute of Child Protection Studies.
- ⁴ PSP Learning Hub. (n.d.). *Permanency Support Program sector workforce development and training strategy*.
- ⁵ Urquhart, R. (2017) *Permanency Support Program Needs Analysis*. ACWA, Sydney.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ McCarthy, S., & Griffiths, L.J. (2021). How do leaders enable and support the implementation of evidence-based programs and evidence-informed practice in child welfare? A systematic literature review. *Human Service Organisations, Management, Leadership & Governance*, 45(5), 410-430.
- ⁸ Julien-Chinn, F.J., & Lietz, C.A. (2019). Building learning cultures in the child welfare workforce. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 99, 360-365.
- ⁹ Bromfield, L., & Holzer, P. (2008). A national approach for child protection: Project report. Policy & Practice Paper, Child Family Community Australia; Lonne, B., Harries, M., & Lantz, S. (2012). Workforce development: A pathway to reforming child protection systems in Australia. *British Journal of Social Work*, 1-19; Hansen, P., & Ainsworth, F. (2013). Australian child protection services: A game without end. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 22(1), 104-110; Scott, D. (2010). Here under the Southern Cross: Reflections on child welfare. *Developing Practice*, 26, 4-6.
- ¹⁰ See Fallor, K., Grabarek, M., & Ortega, R.M. (2010). Commitment to child welfare work: What predicts leaving and staying? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(6), 840-846.
- ¹¹ NSW Department of Communities and Justice (2020) *Practice Framework Standards for child protection and out-of-home care practitioners*. Office of the Senior Practitioner
- ¹² Above n 50, Boraggina-Ballard, Sobeck & Honig.
- ¹³ [Evidence Review of Permanency Practices](#), Research Centre for Children and Families, The University of Sydney, August 2019.
- ¹⁴ Ibid
- ¹⁵ Isokurtti, N., Aaltio, E., Laajasalo, T. and Barlow, J. (2020) Effectiveness of child protection practice models: a systematic review. *Child Abuse & Neglect*: (108) 1-11
- ¹⁶ Mackey, (2021). *Barriers and enablers to conducting domestic violence research with children* [PhD Thesis]. Australian Catholic University, School of Allied Health <https://doi.org/10.26199/acu.8w440>
- ¹⁷ Sheridan, S.M., Edwards, C. P., Marvin, C. A., & Knoche, L. L. (2009). Professional Development in Early Childhood Programs: Process Issues and Research Needs. *Early Education Development*, 20(3), 377-401.
- ¹⁸ Wesley, P. W., & Buysse, V. (2001). Communities of Practice: Expanding Professional Roles to Promote Reflection and Shared Inquiry. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 21(2), 114-123.
- ¹⁹ AbSec, NSW Child Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation. (2019). *Aboriginal Child & Family Investment Strategy Workforce Development Project: Consolidated Report*. NSW: Marrickville.
- ²⁰ Griffiths, A., Collins-Camargo, C., Horace, A., Gabbard, J., & Roysse, D. (2020). A new perspective: Administrator recommendations for reducing child welfare turnover. *Human Service Organisations, Management, Leadership & Governance*, 44(5), 417-433.
- ²¹ Oxford University Press. (2019). *Definition of self-care in English* [English Oxford Living Dictionaries]. Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/self-care>
- ²² Salloum, A., Kondrat, D., Johnco, C., & Olson, K. (2015). The role of self-care on compassion satisfaction, burnout and secondary trauma among child welfare workers. *Child and Youth Services Review*, 49, 54-61; Bober, T., & Regehr, C. (2005). Strategies for reducing secondary or vicarious trauma: Do they work? *Brief Treatment and Crisis Intervention*, 6(1), 1-9; Deaver, A.H., Cudney, P., & Strolin-Goltzman, J.S. (2020). Culture of safety: Using policy to address traumatic stress among the child welfare workforce. *Families in Society: Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 101(4), 428-443; Klein, C.J., Riggerbach-Hays, J.J., Sollenberger, L.M., Harney, D.M., & McGarvey, J.S. (2018). Quality of life and compassion satisfaction in clinicians: A pilot intervention study for reducing compassion fatigue. *American Journal of Hospice & Palliative Medicine*, 35(6), 882-888.
- ²³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2021). *Welfare workforce. Snapshot*. Canberra, Australian Government.
- ²⁴ AbSec. *Aboriginal Child and Family Investment Strategy Workforce Development Project Consolidated Report*; 2019.
- ²⁵ Nelson JR, Bennett-Levy J, Wilson S, Ryan K, Rotumah D, Budden W, Beale D, Stirling J. (2015) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health practitioners propose alternative clinical supervision models. *International Journal of Mental Health*. 44(1-2):33-45
- ²⁶ Scerra, N. (2011) *Models of Supervision for Aboriginal Staff: A review of literature*. Research paper #4. UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families.
- ²⁷ SNAICC. (2021) *Keeping our kids safe: Cultural safety and the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations*. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.
- ²⁸ Scerra, N. (2011) *Models of Supervision for Aboriginal Staff: A review of literature*. Research paper #4. UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families.

²⁹ Webster E, Hall A, Hill Y, See C, Simons E, Havrlant R, Osten R. (2022) Building cultural responsiveness in a mainstream health organisation with '8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning': a participatory action research study. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*.

³⁰ Russ, E., Morley, L., Driver, M., Lonne, B., Harries, M., & Higgins, D. (2022). Trends and needs in the Australian child welfare workforce: An exploratory study. Canberra: ACU Institute of Child Protection Studies.