# Report

# Ministerial roundtable on relational care

November 2025

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**About ACWA**

The Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) is the NSW peak body representing non-government community organisations that deliver services to children, young people and their families who need support. Our member agencies include organisations providing a range of important services to improve children's safety, including early intervention, family preservation and out-of-home care services. We collaborate with our members, partners, government and non-government organisations and other peaks to advocate for systemic reform to improve the lives of children and young people.
www.acwa.asn.au

**About the Centre for Relational Care**

The Centre for Relational Care (CRC) is an independent, not-for profit advocacy body committed to the fundamental transformation of child protection and out-of-home care. We want all kids impacted by out-of-home care to experience safe, secure relationships with attuned adults who are in their corner. But too many children grow up in deep relational deprivation because the system struggles to prioritise human connection over bureaucracy.
centreforrelationalcare.org.au

# Background

Children need warm, responsive, stable relationships with adults so that they can thrive. There are almost 14,000 children in out-of-home care (OOHC) in NSW, many of whom have experienced disruption and loss in relationships. Genuine, respectful relationships between practitioners and children and families is crucial to supporting healing and change, yet we know that this is not the experience for many.

ACWA and CRC are collaborating on a project to strengthen and expand relational practice in OOHC.

The project aims are to:

- Increase understanding of the extent to which practitioners understand and practice relational care with children, parents, families and carers.
- Identify enablers and barriers to developing and sustaining these relationships.
- Develop and test strategies to empower practitioners to engage in the practice of building mutually trusting, positive relationships with children, parents, families and carers.
- Support government OOHC reforms and sector improvements.

To help inform this work, ACWA and CRC:

- Surveyed 201 practitioners working in OOHC services about their experiences of relational practice, what supports their practice and what gets in the way.
- Facilitated discussion groups with practitioners and managers.
- Co-hosted a Ministerial roundtable with key stakeholders in November 2025.

This report summarises the key themes arising from the roundtable.

# About the roundtable

On 3 November 2025, ACWA and CRC co-hosted a roundtable on relational care with the Hon. Kate Washington, Minister for Families and Communities, and senior representatives from peak bodies, government and non-government organisations, and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

The roundtable was delivered in workshop format, facilitated by Martin Stewart-Weeks (Public Purpose). The aim was to develop practical actions to embed relational practice across OOHC services. The following stakeholders were represented:

- General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd)
- The Hon. Kate Washington and staff
- AbSec
- Barnardos Australia
- Challenge Community Services
- Department of Communities and Justice
- Eleanor Duncan Aboriginal Services
- Key Assets Australia
- Life Without Barriers
- MacKillop Family Services
- Muloobinba Aboriginal Corporation
- Office of the Children's Guardian
- OzChild
- Settlement Services International
- Stepping Stone House
- Uniting NSW.ACT
- Wesley Mission

# Emergent themes

Roundtable participants explored three questions:

1. What immediate steps can we take to dismantle some of the barriers to relational practice?
2. What immediate steps can we take to enhance practitioner confidence in their relational skills?
3. How can we work in a way that reflects the values and practice of relational care?

The group identified several opportunities across eight categories:

- Cultural authority
- Prioritise relationships
- Learn together
- Develop skills
- Lead and empower
- Reframe language
- Listen and act
- Measure what matters

# OPPORTUNITIES

## CULTURAL AUTHORITY

### Connection to community and culture

1. Give authority to communities
2. Honour family and local decision-making; families at the top, not the bottom
3. Understand what's important to each child (e.g. language, faith, ethnicity)
4. Visit and learn about relational care from ACCOs

## REFRAME LANGUAGE

### Language is powerful

We can all reframe our language – when we write, when we talk:

- What would we say to our own children and family?
- How are we talking to children about their families?

## LEAD + EMPOWER

### Leaders need to drive change

1. Model relationship-building at all levels and across sectors
2. Drive a culture of relational care within the agency and the broader sector, through modelling, supervision, training, team meetings
3. Explore how to 'cap' the number of families that each worker supports
4. Challenge risk and compliance thinking – at the organisational and the systems level
5. Empower staff; decentralise decision-making

## LISTEN + ACT

### The importance of listening to children, parents, families and carers – and acting on what we hear

1. Ask questions to understand if children have at least one trusted adult in their life
2. Ask families: 'Was that helpful?'
3. Ask questions to understand what people want and need, and what good relationships look and feel like to them
4. Ask questions to understand how children want their story to be held and told
5. OCG consider how to consult children and young people
6. It's more than listening – we must act on what we hear

# OPPORTUNITIES

## LEARN TOGETHER

### Collaborate, learn together and share back

1. Explore and describe what relational care looks and feels like
2. Share what we learn from families with the broader sector, highlighting shared experiences
3. Spotlight examples of what's working well
4. Summarise/translate the findings from research with children, families & carers and share across the sector

## PRIORITISE RELATIONSHIPS

### Create an authorising environment to prioritise relational care

1. OCG, DCJ & NGOs develop strategies to reduce administrative burden
2. Explore different ways of completing plans e.g. Future Plans not Case Plans
3. One story for each child – merge all plans into one
4. Explore AI and technological solutions to reducing administrative time
5. Help children and young people to keep connections with friends and peers

## DEVELOP SKILLS

### Support and empower practitioners

1. Demonstrate that courageous conversations are part of building genuine relationships
2. Consistent training/professional development opportunities across gov and non-gov sectors
3. Recognise that restoration requires a unique skill set and experience
4. Training from therapeutic specialists
5. Relational coaching and mentoring for practitioners & especially young workers, including on flexible & responsive boundaries e.g. hugs, love
6. Develop a sector Capability and Confidence Framework
7. Develop a Practice Framework
8. Develop a sector workforce strategy and clarify role expectations

## MEASURE WHAT MATTERS

### Measure what matters

1. Ask what children, parents and carers think of what we're doing and how we're relating to them
2. Measure progress on children's wants and hopes
3. Explore and measure - what are the moments that matter?
4. Use storytelling and narrative
5. Keep it simple

# Next steps

ACWA and CRC are working with a group of non-government service providers, government representatives and people with lived experience to drive change across the OOHC sector.

Over the first half of 2026, the group will draw on the findings from the survey, discussion groups and Ministerial roundtable to develop new approaches or expand existing initiatives that support and empower practitioners to prioritise relational practice.

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