Australian Human Rights Commission

‘A ground to grow from’:

Supporting Quality Engagement with Children

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Suggested citation

Australian Human Rights Commission (2025). *'A ground to grow from': Supporting Quality Engagement with Children*. Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission.

Acknowledgements

'A ground to grow from': Supporting Quality Engagement with Children was written by Sophie Charles, Matt Gibbs, Kerry O'Donohue, and Jami Blood. The project team also included Melissa Goldman, Violeta Marticorena Politoff, and Isobella Rafty. Thanks to Susan Nicolson, Susan Newell, Wayanna Padukka, Beth Thomas-Richards, Anna Scovelle, Izzy Anderson, Roxana Aguilar Alonso, Polly Jenner, Rosemary Lee and Ashlee Parcell for their support.

The National Children's Commissioner thanks the children and young people who participated in consultations, and the partner organisations who helped create the opportunities for this participation.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Human Rights Commission acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia, and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to their Elders – past and present.

Further information

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Cover image by Kiarah Willadsen Halliday

Design and layout by Claudia Williams

ISBN: 978-1-921449-14-7

Australian Human Rights Commission

‘A ground to grow from’:

Supporting Quality Engagement with Children

2024 Report

Support contact page

- **Kids Helpline**: Aged 5 to 25 years: Online and telephone counselling service.
  Phone: **1800 55 1800**
  Webchat: **kidshelpline.com.au/get-help/webchat-counselling**
- **Headspace**: Aged 12 to 25 years: Support and counselling for young people.
  Phone: **1800 650 890**
  Online support: **headspace.org.au/eheadspace**
- **Lifeline**: All ages: 24-hour crisis support.
  Phone: **13 11 14**
- **1800 RESPECT Australia**: All ages: 24-hour telephone support for people affected by family, domestic and sexual violence.
  Phone: **1800 737 732** or text **0458 737 732**
- Online support: **1800RESPECT.org.au**
- **Bravehearts**: All ages: Child sexual abuse support and advice.
  Phone: **1800 272 831** or visit: **bravehearts.org.au**
- **Blue Knot:** All ages: information and support for anyone who is affected by complex trauma
  Phone: **1300 657 380**
  Online support: **blueknot.org.au**
- **13YARN**: All ages: 24-hour telephone support for mob who are feeling overwhelmed or having difficulty coping.
  Phone: **13YARN (13 92 76)**
- **Beyond Blue**: All ages: Free mental health service offering counselling, coaching and online chat support.
  Phone: **1300 22 4636**
  Online support: **forums.beyondblue.org.au**

More information about the **Department of Social Services Safe and Supported Framework** can be found at **https://www.dss.gov.au/child-protection/safe-and-supported-implementation**

For more information on the **Australian Human Rights Commission**, see our website: **humanrights.gov.au**

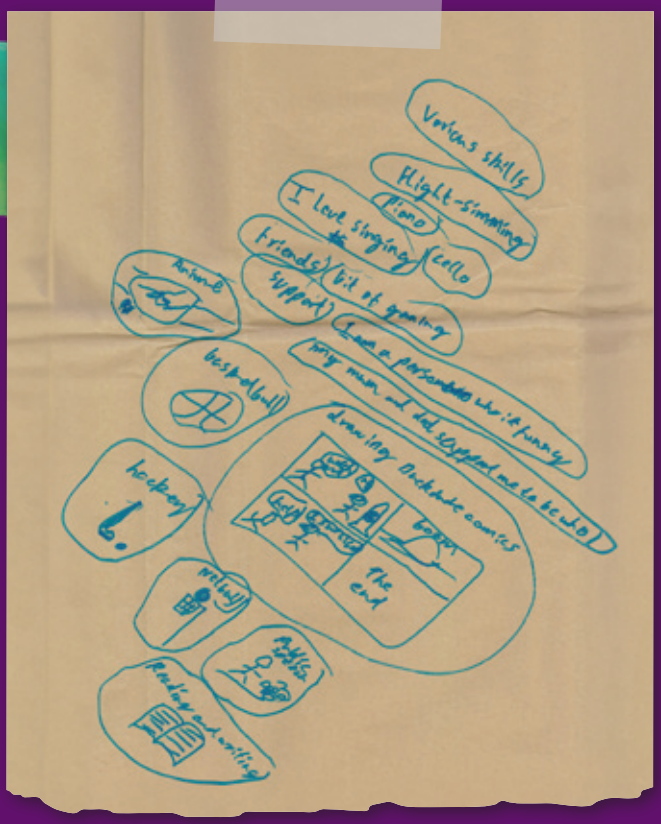
Contents

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACCOs	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations
ACYP	Advocate for Children and Young People (NSW)
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AGD	Attorney-General's Department
AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ANROWS	Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CARM	Culturally and Racially Marginalised
C-PTSD	Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DSS	Department of Social Services
FASD	Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual (plus)
MoSS	Museum of Sticks and Stones
NAIDOC	National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee
NAP	National Action Plan
National Standards	National Standards for out-of-home care
National Strategy	National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2030
NCC	National Children's Commissioner
NIAA	National Indigenous Australians Agency
OOHC	Out-of-home care
PANEL	Participation, Accountability, Non-discrimination and equality, Empowerment, Legality
PCYC	Police Citizens Youth Club
SNAICC	Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, now known as SNAICC – National Voice for our Children
SQE	Supporting Quality Engagement
UC Change	Youth Consult for Change
UN	United Nations
YDAS	Youth Disability Advocacy Service

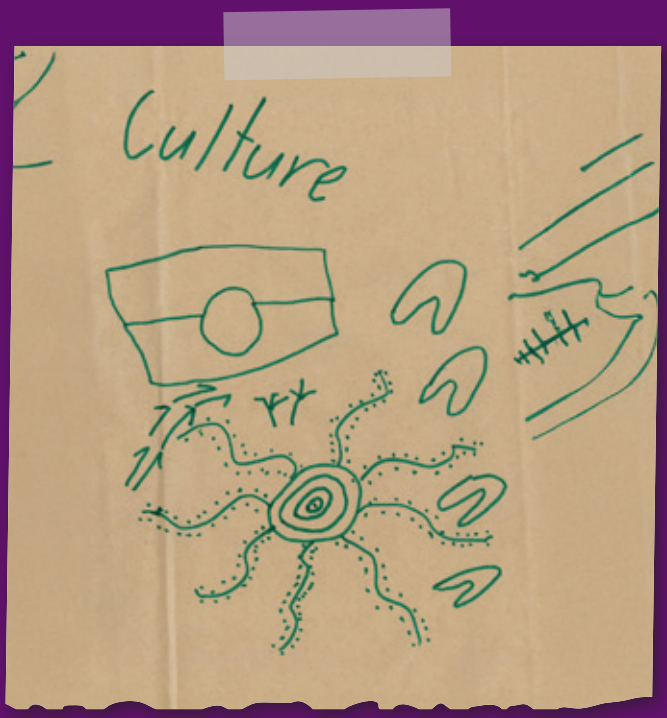
Throughout this report, the terms 'child' and 'children' are used instead of 'children and young people', in line with the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)*, which defines a child as a person below 18 years.

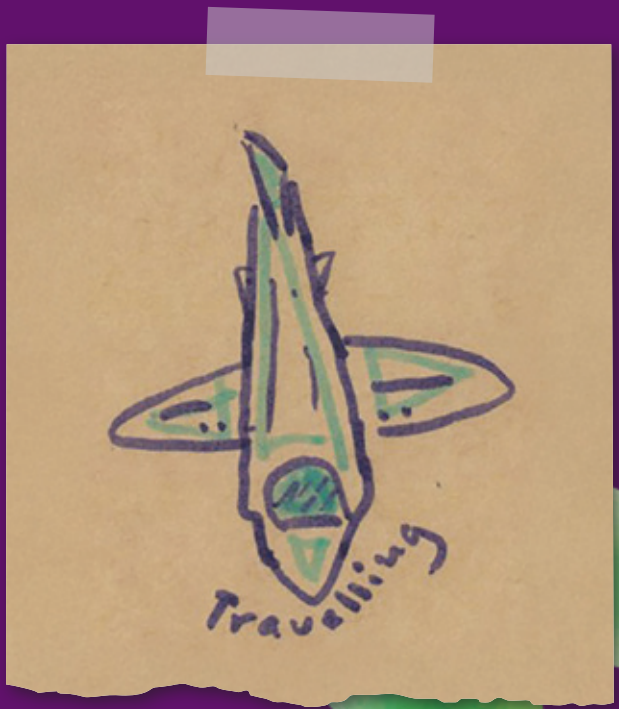
This report uses the term 'First Nations' to refer to children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. We acknowledge the diversity of culture and experience within these groupings, and that First Nations children are not a homogenous group.



In our consultations, children and young people used drawing and writing to unlock and share thoughts, feelings and ideas. Discussions mostly sprang from these visual representations and helped to build a full picture of the situation children and young people face, as well as their vision for the future.

Some of their contributions can be found throughout the report, offering an additional way to highlight the voices of children.





Foreword

The Convention on the Rights of the Child gives children the right to express their views 'freely in all matters affecting the child'. Given that children – our country's youngest citizens – are not entitled to vote, we have to ask ourselves, do children have enough opportunities to express themselves in Australia? Supporting children to have voice and agency is a critical part of their development, and central to this project.

Our report, *A ground to grow from*, explores what children and young people need to develop their identity and a positive sense of self. This is to inform the Government's review of the National Standards for out-of-home care, part of the *Safe and Supported: First Action Plan 2023-2026.* We hope the views of the children we were privileged to hear from will help to improve the lives of all children, especially children who are growing up in out-of-home care.

When we started planning consultations on the theme of 'identity', we were concerned that such a complex subject would be difficult to wrestle with in the short time we with had with children. We needn't have worried - the children and young people we spoke to were bursting with ideas. Overwhelmingly, the children spoke about a sense of belonging and their most important relationships – with family and friends, connected to culture and school – as well as all the different things children love to do, such as playing sports or other activities with team-mates and peers.

Children discussed identity as being multifaceted and they cautioned that we shouldn't compartmentalise the different aspects because identity is all encompassing. Every part of their life influences, and is influenced by, their identity.

The world around them influences who they are and how they think and feel about themselves.

We really need to listen to these ideas and do something with them. In Australia, we are still learning how to translate what we hear from children into our policies and service system design, as well as informing our governance processes and organisational practices. To do this well, we need to listen with **intention**; the intention to **act** on what we have heard.

I'd like to extend my heartfelt thanks to our generous partner organisations for hosting our consultations and managing on-the-ground logistics, to the young people at *UC Change* at the NSW Department of Communities and Justice for their advice and guidance, and our government partners including at the Department of Social Services.

Most importantly, I'd like to say a big thank you to the children and young people across Australia who contributed to this project. Once again, I have been deeply affected by what I heard and with the generosity and care the children demonstrated while sharing their insights with us and each other. In sharing their ideas here, I hope that they will be taken forward to have a real impact on services for children in out-of-home care, and other government policy for Australia's children.

Anne Hollonds

National Children's Commissioner

Executive summary

> **‘I think a ground to grow from for me, in a metaphorical way, is a home, somewhere to belong, with people, doesn’t have to be blood, but people who support you and are willing to teach you in terms of building relationships and helping you try new things so that you can find your own identity.’**

Over 500 children, many with lived experience of out-of-home care (OOHC), participated in consultations around Australia to discuss the concept of identity and what they needed to develop a positive sense of self. This report uses their words, voices and experiences to inform the planned refresh of the National Standards for out-of-home care (National Standards).

A child’s right to participate in decisions that affect their lives is a fundamental principle in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC). The Supporting Quality Engagement (SQE) project explores ways to do that so children can influence the development and implementation of policies, plans and strategies that are designed to improve their lives. When this happens, public policy is made meaningful for children and can lead to genuine change.

> **‘just trying to put the pieces together’**

Children in OOHC can miss out on realising many of their rights, including to grow up in a healthy, happy environment. Children told us that in unsupportive or unstable environments, their identity can be uncertain and fragile and they struggle to find ways to be themselves.

Children said that to develop identity, they need safety, ‘a stable environment and a sense of belonging’. This belonging is centred in relationships, including with family, peers and the community. Connecting to culture, particularly for First Nations children who are over-represented in the OOHC systems, can be critical to ‘who you are’. Children said that activities such as sports and arts can also help them to connect with people.

> **‘the way you connect with people and who you surround yourself with really makes you who you are’**

The sheer number of times connections and relationships arose in consultations highlighted how important this is to identity formation for children. Identity is shaped by experience and exposure. Children spoke in a way that suggested that the quality of relationships was more important than quantity. They need help to ensure that these relationships are strong and constant.

When it came to growth of their identity, children talked about ‘the ability to express yourself in a unique way that’s you’, ‘setting goals for yourself’, ‘building passions’ and ‘keeping culture strong’. They talked about being able to make choices, develop talents, finding their tribe and making plans for the future. Again, relationships were intrinsic to their growth.

> **‘everything that makes you, You’**

Almost all children had something to say about who they were and the people, places, institutions, material things and activities that made them who they were. Identity was multi-dimensional and holistic. The different facets of their lives worked together to make them who they were. When ‘identity’ is defined only in terms of single concepts, like gender or culture, it fails to embrace all the important facets of identity and how they are connected.

The National Standards need to find ways of representing this, so they better reflect the lived experience of children.

> **‘I definitely feel like we should have some say’**

Agency and voice emerged as being critical to identity formation. Parents, carers or authorities ‘should let you have a say in what you’re going to do’. Exercising some choice and control is a big part of finding out who you are. Having people around you willing to listen to and take your views seriously can help children to form a positive sense of themselves and the world around them.

Children with lived experience of OOHC wanted to be more involved in the decisions that were made about their care and in measuring their own development. Enacting this right in the National Standards and indicators must be more intentional if children’s engagement is to be meaningful. Creating mechanisms for children’s ongoing participation in both individual and systemic processes is a key step forward.

In this report, children have given us a language that makes the concept of identity meaningful.

Applying a child rights-based approach to the refresh of the National Standards means acting on their voices. Doing so provides an opportunity to enrich the National Standards to ensure that they are fit for purpose.

The following recommended actions are based on what children have said could help them to ‘be who they are’.

Recommendations

International best practice indicates the CRC should guide all policy design and implementation relating to children. For example, in relation to the National Standards, their implementation and measurement must be child-centred and, where appropriate, child-led. This approach also necessitates an accountability framework in which duty bearers are clearly accountable for their roles.

This first recommendation is directed at all five policy areas. Subsequent recommendations are for how the voices of children can be used to improve the National Standards, as this was the focus of consultations. However, the principles underlying all the recommendations are broadly applicable.

1. Agencies responsible for the five Key National Strategies should place child rights at the centre of policy and program design. This includes creating opportunities for children to participate meaningfully and providing feedback to them on how their views have informed policy development.

2. DSS integrate children's perspectives into any policy development and decisions about the National Standards, by:

a. Using this report's findings to inform the refresh process, including defining 'identity' in language that is used by children

b. Engaging children with lived experience of OOHC in the refresh in an advisory capacity, such as a National Standards reference group

c. Reporting back to the National Standards reference group, and to the National Children's Commissioner, on how children's voices have been integrated into the refresh of the National Standards.

3. DSS ensure that the revised National Standards contain meaningful quantitative and qualitative indicators that have:

a. Clear timeframes for implementation and review

b. Defined milestones for action

c. Multiple means of verification, including child self-reporting, for accuracy and consistency of data

d. Accountability measures for all key stakeholders.

4. DSS, in partnership with state and territory counterparts:

a. Develop child-friendly materials – including accessible and online – about the National Standards

b. Train carers, case workers and OOHC providers about the National Standards and how to engage with children about them.

5. DSS, in partnership with state and territory counterparts, engage children in ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the National Standards.

6. All governments provide ongoing opportunities for children to participate meaningfully – to develop their voice and agency – across all the National Standards including:

a. Involving children in the development, design and measurement of their care plans, including cultural plans, in a child-friendly format and in a manner consistent with their evolving capacities

b. Enabling a child's ongoing access to these plans

c. Providing access to an independent advocate to support children in OOHC decision-making processes

d. Developing an indicator assessing children's awareness and knowledge of their rights under the National Standards

e. Ensuring complaints mechanisms enable direct access for children to raise issues or concerns about the National Standards being met.

7. In the refreshed National Standards and indicators, all governments measure connections and relationships that contribute to a positive sense of identity and wellbeing, including:

a. Children's ongoing contact with people with similar experience to them, such as peers, mentors and siblings, and with other family and friends

b. Children's engagement with cultural activities, practices and community

c. Children's participation in play and recreation activities of their choosing, such as team sports and creative pursuits, so they can connect with other children and positive role models

d. Help provided to children to maintain these connections and relationships as they transition between or out of OOHC arrangements.

8. Acknowledging the overrepresentation of First Nations children within the OOHC system, all governments ensure that these recommendations are implemented in a culturally responsive and trauma informed way which respects the lived experience and agency of First Nations children.

1. Hearing the voices of children

The right of all children to be heard and taken seriously constitutes one of the fundamental principles of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*[1] *(CRC)* and is a key tenet of the child rights-based approach. In Australia, there are opportunities for some children to be heard, including initiatives at national and state levels, in schools, and within organisations in the non-government sector. However, this right is not systematically realised across the country.

While there is a growing awareness of the value of children's voices, how to engage children in a meaningful way that brings about change is still an evolving practice.

There are few opportunities for younger children to engage in ways which draw on their unique lived experiences.[2] Children living in vulnerable or marginalised circumstances also have limited opportunity to participate in such processes. Sensitively including these perspectives in policy making is critical to ensure that policy is meaningful and addresses the needs of those it is designed for.

> **'Us kids we never really get enough say in what's happening, they just make something or they will just vote something in and we don't even have an opinion and it can really affect our lives.'**

1.1 Supporting Quality Engagement with children

Recognising a child's right to express their views freely in matters that affect them, the Australian Government is providing funding over three years (2023–2025) for the National Children's Commissioner (NCC) to increase capacity to consult with children and young people on the effectiveness of Government programs.

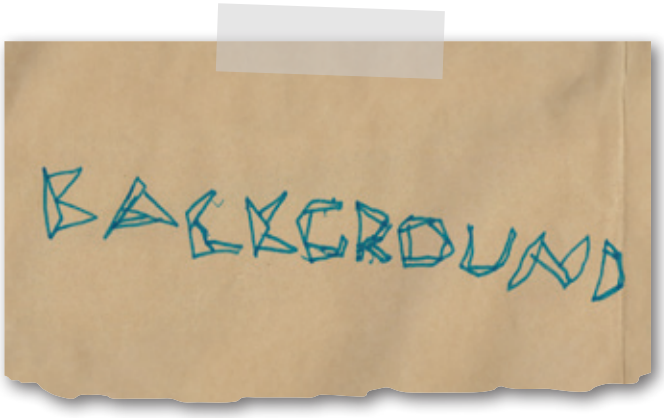
The Supporting Quality Engagement with Children (SQE) consultation project is undertaking consultation activities across five Key National Strategies and associated action plans. These are:

- Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031 (DSS)
- National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 (DSS)
- Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031 (DSS)
- National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030 (AGD)
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy (NIAA).

The consistent priority across these is to elevate the voices of children, and to recommend ways to embed them in decision-making for policy and programs. Accordingly, the objective of the SQE consultation project is to draw on the lived experiences and views of children to contribute to the evidence base informing the design and implementation of Australian Government policies affecting them.

This project is engaging children in safe and trauma-informed ways. The lived experience of children directly impacted by the abovementioned strategies is sought and valued.

Last year the project looked at how to improve services and supports for victim-survivors of child sexual abuse. This included children's ideas about what a website and helpline might look like, to help inform planned measures in the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030*. The report is available here.



1.2 Year 2 Focus: Identity and out-of-home care

The priority area for 2024 was *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031* (Safe and Supported). The overall goal of Safe and Supported is to make significant and sustained progress in reducing the rates of child abuse and neglect and its intergenerational impacts. It has four priority groups:

- Children and families with multiple and complex needs
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people experiencing disadvantage or who are vulnerable
- Children and young people and/or parents/carers with disability experiencing disadvantage or who are vulnerable
- Children and young people who have experienced abuse and/or neglect, including children in out-of-home care and young people leaving out-of-home care and transitioning to adulthood.

The purpose of this past year of the SQE project was to inform the planned refresh of the National Standards which is being undertaken in line with Action 5d of the *Safe and Supported: First Action Plan 2023-2026- Out of Home Care*[3] to reframe the National Standards and indicators.

The policy teams wanted to learn what children understood by their wellbeing and identity and how this could be measured and reported on in the National Standards. A positive sense of identity is recognised as key to children's overall wellbeing. It is one of the core domains identified in The Nest framework developed by Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).[4] The policy teams also wanted to explore the role relationships play in the development of identity and how children can be better supported to build these relationships. Children with an experience of OOHC were a key target group for consultations.

When the National Standards were developed in 2011, the key areas of focus were chosen 'based on broad consultation with children and young people'.[5] It is appropriate that the voices of children are heard from the outset of the National Standards refresh process too. This report presents current perspectives of a diverse range of children. It provides insights into how children define identity, what happens when children do not have the opportunity to find a positive sense of self, and what children need to develop their identity.

1.3 The children we consulted with

Over 500 children participated in 96 consultations around the country. The project team travelled to all states and territories, including metropolitan, regional and remote areas. The consultations were a mix of small focus groups and individual interviews, held either in person or online. The target age range for consultations was 8–14 years.

All consultations were arranged through partner organisations that provide services to children. These included generalist settings, such as schools, educational programs, child and youth services and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). Over a quarter of consultation participants (124) were children with direct experience of OOHC. These consultations took place in specialist settings such as foster and kinship agencies, residential care settings and youth refuges. The decision to consult with a broad cross-section of children was deliberate. Each year of the SQE Project we aim to reach children within the specified priority group as well as children in generalist settings.

Safeguarding was of utmost importance. All consultations took place with the support of a trusted adult (such as a teacher, youth worker or case worker) who was available to the child both during the session and afterwards. The project team provided choice as to how sessions took place, offering a variety of options for participation.

We asked children what identity meant to them and what critical things they needed to grow up with a strong and positive sense of themselves. Consultations centred around a graffiti wall activity (see Appendix 2), with children communicating their ideas through discussion, writing and drawing.

Consultations were supplemented by an anonymous survey to collect demographic information and solicit supplementary responses to the consultation questions. We also asked children what they thought about the consultation process itself. Overwhelmingly children reflected that 'being able to express how it feels' and 'being listened to' was the best part. One child saw the consultations as a 'golden opportunity to express my voice'.

> **'talking about identity reminds you of who you are'**

Many children gave positive feedback about participating in consultation activities with peers. They commented that 'being able to discuss with each other' and 'listening to people's opinions' had helped them to 'learn new things'. The environment for the discussion was critical to this. Some children stressed the importance of 'trust', the sessions being 'inclusive' and that having an atmosphere of connection and collaboration was critical. This, along with options of both individual and group formats, was important in enabling children 'to talk without being scared'. One child reflected that it is 'hard to talk about these things and be vulnerable about it'.

Some children wanted more opportunities for consultation, highlighting that they 'would like more sessions like this to talk about my feelings'. Another child stressed that we need to go beyond talking, take action on children's views and 'actually making these changes happen'.

This report aims to centre the voices of the children we spoke with. We have deliberately chosen to present these voices consistently and in a unified way. We have chosen to present the accounts of children in generalist settings and children with OOHC experience together, rather than to separately present these voices, for example in distinct chapters.

Much of what we heard from participants speaks to the common experiences and rights of all children, regardless of their parental/legal status. We were mindful that many of the children with OOHC experience told us that they did not want to be labelled as a child in foster or 'resi care' and have that define them. Furthermore, children

who had not experienced OOHC were sometimes able to highlight or articulate aspects of identity formation their peers in care did not have the opportunity or language to articulate.

Throughout the report we have, however, identified and highlighted when children commented on their specific experiences in OOHC or made suggestions for improvements.

Demographics and further information about how we consulted can be found in Appendix 1 and 2.

1.4 Situation of children in out-of-home care

In Australia today, there are currently 45,273 children classified as living in OOHC (as of 30 June 2023).[6] This is when children and young people live in alternative accommodation because they are unable to live with their parents, often to be protected from abuse, neglect or unsafe environments.[7]

A nationally consistent definition of OOHC was adopted in 2019. The different types of care include residential care, family group homes, foster care, independent living, and relative/ kinship care.[8] The definition excludes children in pre-adoptive placements, children on immigration orders, young people aged 18 years and over and children on Third Party Parental Responsibility Orders (TPPROs).[9] Excluding these groups of children has been questioned by some in the sector[10] who suggest that it underrepresents the scale of the issue. [11]

A majority of children in OOHC live in major cities (54.8 per cent) or regional areas (40.3 per cent), with only 3.8 per cent living in remote or very remote areas.[12] Children aged 10–14 years make up the largest proportion of those in OOHC (32.1 per cent). Boys are overrepresented in every state and territory,[13] while 21.3 per cent of children in OOHC nationally have a disability. [14] It is noted that disability status is only known for 72 per cent of the children in OOHC so the rates of disability may in fact be higher.

First Nations children are significantly overrepresented in the OOHC system. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 10.8 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be in OOHC or subject to a TPPRO. [15] Over the next decade, the population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC and on TPPROs is projected to rise by 38 per cent, compared to a 5 per cent increase for non-Indigenous children during the same period.[16]

Children in OOHC can experience intersecting disadvantage and cumulative harms. While OOHC is intended to provide a safe environment for children, it can cause significant disruptions to their lives.[17] For example, children who grow up in OOHC are at a greater risk of missing out on education. In one study, only 57 per cent of OOHC leavers aged 18–25 completed Year 12 or an equivalent[18], compared to the national average of 85 per cent.[19]

(a) Policy landscape: the National Standards for out-of-home care

The National Standards for OOHC have not historically been unified or consistent across national, state and territory jurisdictions. They were developed in 2011 to promote consistency in the delivery of quality care across states and territories. These Standards were designed to ensure that children in OOHC have equal opportunities to achieve their full potential, regardless of where they live in Australia. By creating a unified framework, the National Standards seek to address the diverse needs of children in care. The National Standards have not been adopted in all jurisdictions, so uniformity of standards across states and territories is still lacking. The National Standards were a priority under the previous framework for protecting Australia's children (2009–2020), and the last update against these indicators was reported by AIHW in 2022.[20] The National Standards operate within a complex policy context, including the five Key National Strategies under this project as well as other significant initiatives such as the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*[21].

The states that currently use the National Standards include South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. States and territories that have their own standards, charters of rights, or frameworks of care are New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria, Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

The 13 National Standards focus on key domains to ensure positive outcomes for children living in OOHC. These include areas such as their education, health, family connection, culture, safety and stability. Each Standard has a limited number of associated indicators to measure performance. All indicators are quantitative. They are designed to ensure accountability so that children in OOHC are afforded opportunities that are available to their peers in the broader population.

Identity is explicitly referenced in Standard 10, which notes that children should be 'supported to develop their identity'. It references contact with family, friends, culture, spirituality and community, as well as the importance of children having their life story recorded. However, the National Standards do not acknowledge intersectionality, that is, the way different aspects of a person's identity interact to create unique experiences of discrimination and disadvantage.

While this Standard goes some way to reflecting the broad influences on identity formation, the current measurement is limited. For example, it is focused on narrow areas of reporting such as the proportion of First Nations children with a cultural support plan or the proportion who demonstrate a 'sense of connection' with their community. There is no commentary on the quality of plans that have been approved. Also, there is no indicator for children from other cultural backgrounds. Having clear and meaningful measurements are critical to ensure that the aspirations of the Standards are met.

The planned refresh of the National Standards indicates the Government's ongoing commitment to national consistency of services for children in need of support. It is also a necessary step to improve conditions for children in OOHC around Australia.

2. A Child Rights-Based Approach

Child rights are grounded firmly in the basic human needs for life, growth and development.

The NCC advocates for a child rights-based approach, which translates the CRC into practical actions. This is a way of working that gives children the right to be heard and to have their voices considered. It also helps children claim other rights, including putting them as the first consideration in all policy design and implementation.

Australia is a signatory of the CRC. Under the CRC governments have the ultimate responsibility for ensuring children are able to realise their rights. This makes the governments the primary 'duty bearers'.

Child rights-based approach principles:

- Dignity
- Participation
- Life, survival and development
- Non-discrimination
- Transparency and accountability
- Best interests of the child
- Interdependence and indivisibility

The SQE project aims to help children to realise their participation rights by asking them their views on matters that affect them. They are at the centre of this process and their views are privileged in this report. Participation is an active, ongoing process.

The existence of the National Standards is consistent with a rights-based approach. As noted by the CREATE Foundation, their introduction was one of the first times that elements of the CRC had been incorporated into a commonly agreed set of objectives by all governments across Australia.[22] The priority now must be to ensure that the child is at centre of content and process related to the Standards. A child rights-based approach to the National Standards and associated indicators would centre the child in the National Standards by ensuring that they reflect how children experience their world, shaping measurement of identity-formation in a way that make sense for all children. This approach would also assign clear actions to the State and other duty bearers.

These include carers, case workers, child protection department managers, non-government organisations and government agencies. Standards in some states, such as Tasmania, include rights-based language, as do the various charters of rights, where they exist. Much can be drawn upon from these standards and charters to inform a rights-based approach to the National Standards.

The National Standards must also centre the child in a way that helps them to understand the rights that they hold. During consultations, children in OOHC said that they did not know what the National Standards were. Children in OOHC must be empowered to learn about their rights, and the National Standards that ostensibly help to safeguard and promote these rights.

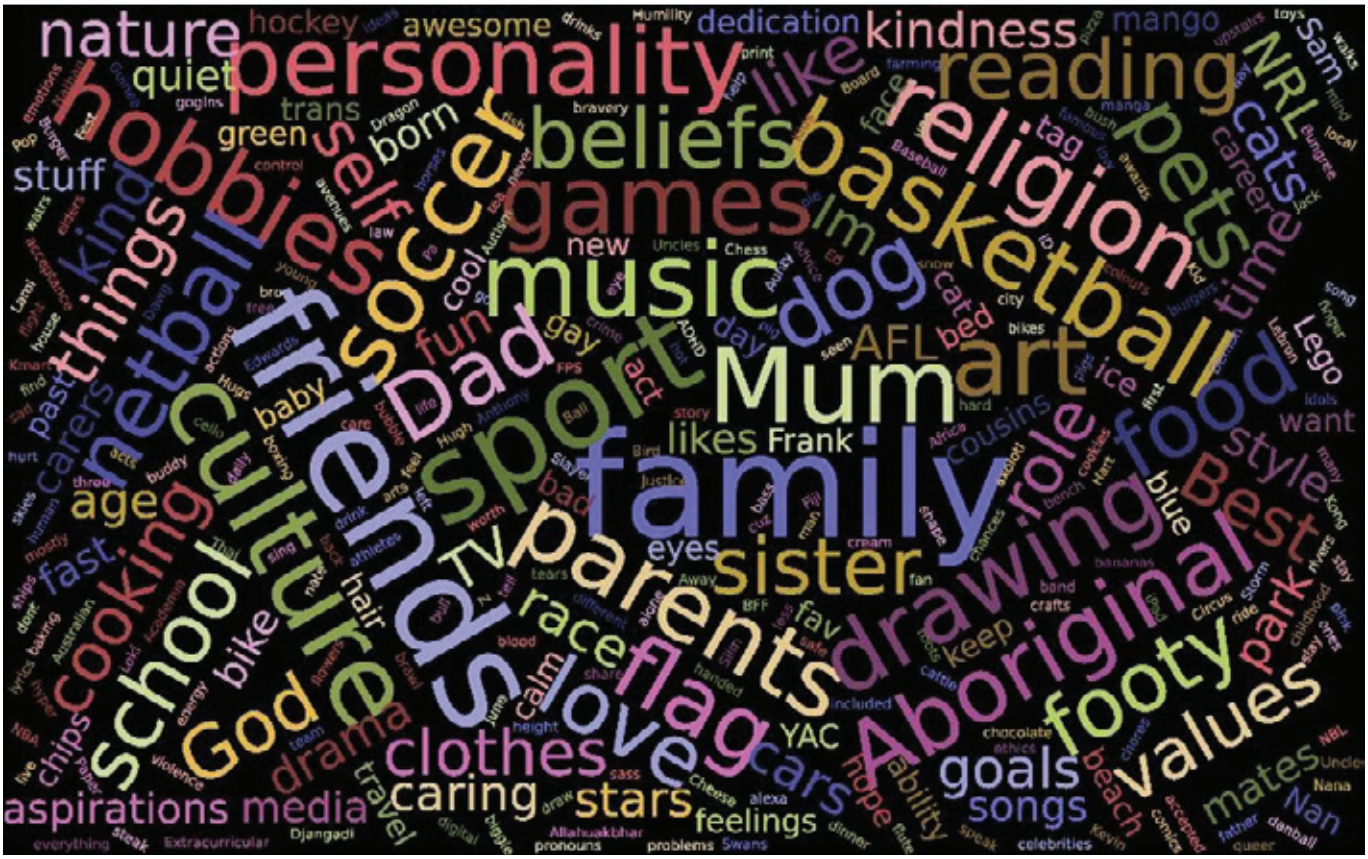
Children from First Nations backgrounds and children with disabilities have specific rights set out in international treaties such as the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*[23] *(UNDRIP) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*[24] (CRPD), however they can face particular challenges within OOHC systems, including placements which may be poorly suited to their needs or experiences. The National Standards must reflect the intersectional nature of children's identities and enable the realisation of their rights to express the entirety of who they are.

Children have identities from the moment they are born. What we have been learning from children is that their identities shift as they grow. To develop to their potential, this growth must be shaped by the realisation of their rights – including their own burgeoning agency – and the support and facilitation of the people around them. These include their families, their friends and peers, their communities and their educators.

Because the ensuing analysis centres the child, it provides a useful starting point for any action that seeks to review or refresh standards and services for children that directly impact on their identity formation and development.

3. How children defined identity

Children shared many ideas in discussions about what identity means to them. Following are some of the key words that children raised when brainstorming the concept of identity, and some of the other ways they thought about identity and sense of self.



Children defined identity as 'everything that makes you, You'. Children highlighted that a person's identity is unique and individual, something which makes us different to others. One child explained 'everyone has an identity and everyone's identity is different... it's like a thumb print'.

Some common ideas and themes arose when children spoke about identity. These included age, gender, culture, personality, hobbies, connections, values and opinions.

Many spoke about their identity encompassing both internal perceptions (such as 'the way you think and feel') and external perceptions (such as how others view you). Children said that identity is 'always going to mean something else to someone else'.

Children described identity as multi-dimensional

There are many aspects to your identity and these can be expressed in different ways. One child listed the different types of identity from their perspective:

- 'Cultural identity
- Personal identity
- Ethical identity
- Educational identity
- Sociopolitical identity
- Aspirational identity
- Morality identity
- Online identity
- Internal identity
- Interpersonal identity
- Social identity'

Children spoke about identity as being holistic and formed in connection with other people, places, activities and value systems. They explained that it is moulded and shaped by experience and exposure. One child in OOHC articulated identity formation in this way:

> 'I think that identity is made up of your perception of yourself, your mindset, your environment, your people around you, made up of a place where you belong, and things that you enjoy doing, your interests and your strengths and weaknesses have a big impact on your identity as well... It all comes down to what you are like and what you think... to kind of create that identity with everyone else.'

Children often described identity in positive terms and linked this to having a positive sense of self. 'Identity' and 'sense of self' are linked expressions and children seemed to use them interchangeably in consultations. According to MoSS, a helpful way of conceiving the two concepts is as follows: 'identity' is who we are in relation to other people, the labels and characteristics which can define us, whereas 'sense of self' is more subjective and based on our personal perceptions, the 'story... we tell ourselves'.[25]

Some children also stressed that there could be difficulties with identity formation, especially if children lacked the conditions and supports for this process.

One child in OOHC described the cyclical nature of perceptions and feelings, and how that impacted your identity. They said 'how you perceive the world can affect how you feel and therefore affect how you act, which also affects how other people see you, and also goes back to your identity and your backstory impacting your perceptions'. Similarly, some children talked about identity formation as an ongoing process.

The elements that children said comprised and influenced identity are discussed in the following sections.

4. What can go wrong with building identity for some children

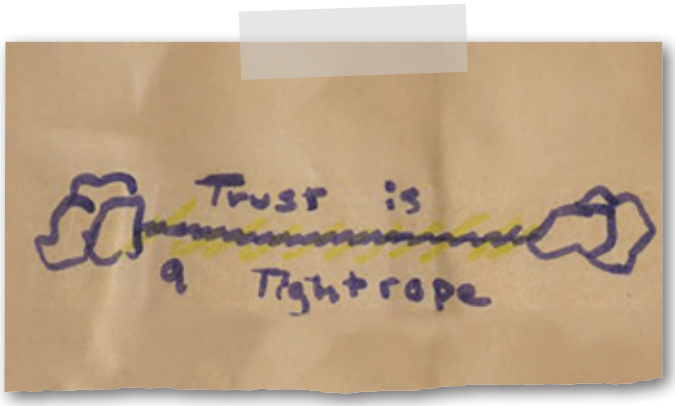
Children talked about some of the difficulties with the concept of identity, and how identity formation can be complicated. Many children told us what happens if children don't have help and support to discover elements of their identity. Children with lived experience of OOHC shared the difficulties they faced in getting to know themselves and having opportunities to grow in a way that felt healthy to them. General groups of children also raised challenges that they face in building a positive sense of self.

Following are the issues that children raised in consultations. In doing so, they highlighted the importance of addressing identity formation in the context of the National Standards.

(a) Identity can be uncertain

Many children in OOHC found it hard to connect with the concept of identity. The idea did not resonate, and they struggled to articulate what it meant to them. Some were dismissive of the idea – 'I don't have an identity' – and talked about how they 'just float around' without thinking about it because 'I don't have time'.

One child said that their sense of self was reflected in the uncertainty of OOHC: 'I couldn't even think when I was in the resi home.... It's very temporary, and you know it's temporary, so you can't find yourself'. Similarly, children talked about not feeling safe and 'not being able to sleep because you don't know what's going to happen next'.



> **'I feel like if you're constantly moving you probably like don't get a chance to properly form an idea of who you are as a person.'**

Other children described how identity formation relies on happiness, because 'if you can't be happy, you can't be you' and 'it's easier to be you when you're happy'.

(b) Identity can be shifting and fragile

In OOHC, 'it is hard to hold onto your sense of self... really hard'. We heard that children who lack support can become stunted, unable to connect to people or culture, to explore the passions they like, develop talents, find their tribe, unable to reach their potential or discover their true selves. Some children talked about having a feeling of who they wanted to be, but 'if you don't have the support that you need, you might grow up differently to what you want'.

In relation to culture, if children were raised away from community and country, they described culture as lacking meaning and importance to them as it didn't form a big part of their self-identity. This was in contrast to other children who saw it as central and permeating all parts of their life. Where this connection was tenuous, some children spoke about judgement and shame, which can be reinforced socially, politically and in the mainstream media, when 'some people don't feel good to express who they are, what their culture is or their background because they don't want to get made fun of'.

Living with a fragile identity can be characterised by self-doubt, which 'can make you want to back down and not do many things'. Similarly, children in difficult situations can withdraw and 'may sense that people won't accept them and they're scared that people won't like them'.

(c) Children crave belonging and want to fit in

Children told us that 'our personality can change, or grow, or weaken. It can change in all sorts of ways'. One thing that influences children is their desire to fit in. Earlier in adolescence, 'You begin to feel a lot more emotions, like a lot of stuff is going on in your life. So, trying to fit in is one of the things you deem important... You might want to change your personality so you can fit in easier'.

Children can be fearful of standing out or being different. For children who dress differently, act differently or are living with disability, 'most of the time if you have anything wrong with you mentally or physically, people will make assumptions about who you are'. Some went further, saying 'in most schools you cannot be yourself. You have to be someone you're not to actually fit in'. Many children spoke about bullying and said to avoid this, young people can 'dial down a lot', moderating who they are.

> **'I have a disability so it's hard – and it's hard when you can't be with those cool kids even though I really want to, but you're just that outsider.'**

One child said that friendship groups can negatively influence identity formation. They talked about peer pressure when 'some of your friends are being mean' leading to the perception that 'that's kind of what you are like', even if that doesn't reflect how you feel about yourself. They took this further in terms of external perceptions of identity and said that negative perceptions 'ruins your reputation'.

Children worry about 'what they look like' or that they do something that other people find is 'weird'. For children without a ready support network, especially at home, 'sometimes it can be hard to find someone who's accepting'.

Many children spoke about 'how you look' and 'the way other people look at you' impacting how you feel about yourself. They talked about their physical appearance, 'eye colour', 'hair', skin colour and 'weight' all having an impact. Some children spoke about racism being widespread, leading to a feeling they need to 'change how you look to not get made fun of or to not have people look at you differently'. One child gave an example of a peer being bullied and having 'bleached her own skin to try to look lighter' and another peer straightening their 'really nice curly hair' to avoid being 'made fun of'. Children spoke about racism negatively impacting feelings of safety and belonging.

> **'No one should be treated worse than, like, anyone else just because of the way they look or because of the colour of their skin. Or even, like, the way they talk, the way they look. All that stuff.'**

(d) Gender stereotyping can negatively influence identity

Discrimination and stereotyping came up in relation to gender and the pressure to present in certain ways, limiting self-expression. One participant commented 'if a guy cries everyone judges him, but if a girl cries everyone wants to go help her'.

Some children spoke about being limited by the expected behaviour for their gender, such as what sports you play or clothes you wear. They said that while they are told 'anyone can do anything', in reality, it is hard not to conform to traditional expectations. This starts early, 'the second you are born into a gender you have all the stereotype things' and 'as a child you see marketed pink or blue', and 'if you're a boy, you're stronger and so you play more sport'. Some children spoke about being teased for choosing certain sports, 'it's hard for me being a boy and doing netball' or 'a boy doing dance, they get picked on by the girls'.

The idea of boys having to be 'strong' and being 'stronger' than girls came up often in discussions about gender. One male participant commented that 'people say boys are bigger and girls are smaller but it's not true'. They spoke about the impact of this, that it makes their female peers feel 'like they need to stay quiet'.

> **'It's like a lot of boys, like our age, they just don't have the same respect for women as they do for men. They just don't think that women can do everything that they can. They just view (them) less or like just weaker or something.'**

Some children spoke about the challenges for non-binary children who can struggle to 'express themselves in their identity and their gender… because their parents don't accept'. One child spoke of the need for 'more support' and understanding. 'My Dad tells me there's only two genders but I'm fine with they or them'. Another emphasised the need for more understanding of 'people who are trans', stating 'that has to change because the whole world is changing'.

(e) Identity can be fake

A desire 'to change yourself just to fit in' can lead some children to develop a false or 'fake' identity which does not align with their true selves. They said that this comes about when 'you don't accept who you are, so you don't really know who you are in the first place'. Some children spoke about this as 'a disguise'.

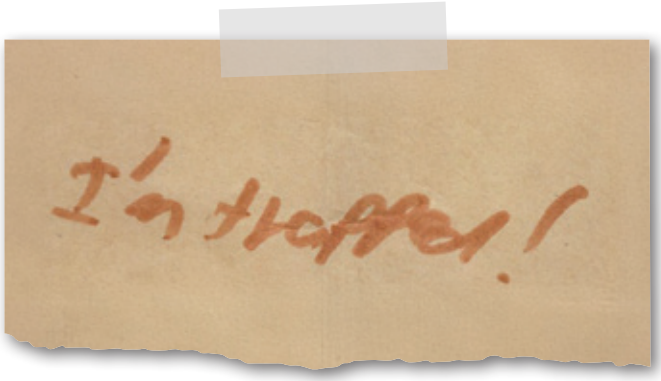
While it can be common for young people to try on different personas as part of their development, children's description of 'fake identity' seemed more about constraint; to be 'a different kind of person or personality… because you know they're probably not going to like you as much they do when you act in different ways'. This can be intensified for children in vulnerable circumstances as the need to fit in can be critical. As one child explained, 'if everything is hard, they are going to make a fake personality that they don't really like to have, or an identity they don't want'.

Young people spoke about the dangers of adopting a fake identity. They highlighted that the further you move away from yourself, or your place of connection, the greater the sense of incongruence and difficulty and 'you could get lost I guess, find it hard to find yourself again'.

> **‘When I was 11, I just wanted to have the street protection, so I changed myself completely, and I hung around with the wrong crowds and I felt like I belonged in that environment. I was just doing their dirty work. But now I can see through that, and I know that’s not a good group of people to hang around. It takes a lot for a troubled kid to get out of it, they are stuck in their head and everyone arounds them head. If they don’t have support they are never getting out of it.’**

(f) Identity can be negative

Children spoke about internalising the negative perceptions of others and this leading to a negative sense of themselves. For example, ‘Labels make it hard… because when they are given labels they are expected to be a certain way’, and stereotypes and stigma start to shape identity.



> **‘I feel as though, if somebody isn’t well dressed, they will get classed as a bad person or something, but if you are well dressed and you’re hanging around with good people, you will get classed as a good person’**

For some children, that sort of labelling becomes self-reinforcing, such as ‘when people would think of me as a bad person, I would believe that, I would go and live up what they’ve put on me’, partly because there’s no one around to counter those labels. This can impact on how a child acts, the risks they take and the relationships they build.

Some children, including those with experience of OOHC, conflated the negative experiences they have had in their lives with their sense of self. This gets in the way of their growth because ‘some people might be ashamed of the past, others don’t feel comfortable talking about it’. As well as feelings of ‘shame about the way they are’ being a key part of this feeling, ‘maybe when they were growing up they never had people who made them feel good about themselves’. Some children simply can’t hear positive reinforcement ‘because you don’t know how to’.

(g) Family can negatively influence identity formation

Some children commented that ‘parents aren’t always safe‘, that there is ‘disturbance in the families‘ and children won’t always ‘feel safe to talk to them‘.

In the absence of parental role models, some children described forming an identity which involved rejection of their parents’ examples, because ‘my parents make the same mistakes over again and I look at them and say I don’t want to be like them. Nothing like them. I keep my distance’. For one child, had they stayed at home, ‘I would have turned out exactly like them’. They had a sense of who they wanted to be and how events were shaping them. This child reflected ‘it makes me feel bad that I need to disengage from them so I can follow my own path’.

(h) OOHC can become part of identity

Children spoke about the challenges of growing up in OOHC and how it can become part of their identity. This impact takes different shapes.

(i) Loss and disconnection

Children spoke about how they find it 'really, really hard' to articulate and share their experiences, which can lead to feelings of disconnection. People may not know how to react to them, but they 'don't want to have to re-explain my story', which is what happens when you 'start with someone new'. Other children who 'have gone through tough things' simply 'don't know how to communicate that to other people'.

One participant commented on the strong sense of loss and grief at being separated from family 'as a kid I was missing people every day' and 'I wanted to belong in a house where I was cared for'. Some children spoke about being separated from siblings that they 'barely get to see'. One child commented 'I live with two of them. The other six are in (interstate locations) I honestly don't know where the others are but they're fostered'.

Children also spoke of associated losses of pets, homes, possessions, new schools, peers and locations. One participant spoke of their experience of moving, 'I move around a lot, so I don't have a lot of people. Just trying to put the pieces together... a lot of houses that I don't like talking about. Hot ground'.

These losses exacerbate feelings of disconnection to a point where disconnecting becomes a coping mechanism. Some children said they 'don't like speaking to people about my feelings. I try to keep everything to myself'.

(ii) Becoming an adult too soon

Some children in OOHC described having to grow up much faster than their peers and become a 'mini adult'. This had an impact on how well they could relate to their peers and how other adults and peers responded to them. This phenomenon is supported in literature discussing 'parentification'[26] and the issue of the 'little parent'[27].

Many children had to take on adult tasks such as caring for younger siblings or managing the house. Others described feeling hypervigilant, having to think, plan and worry about things that parents or carers would usually take responsibility for. They talked about situations when adults whom they should have been able to rely on were in jail or absent.

> **'I had to grow up fast as a child... I know I missed out on stuff a normal kid experiences... I had to be mature before everyone else, so I've missed out on a big chunk of my childhood'.**

Once they were in OOHC, many children spoke about interacting primarily with adults and being expected to engage in adult ways. One young person said that her carer 'treated me like an adult and I didn't want to be treated like an adult. I needed a parent'. Another child in a separate consultation urged 'treat kids like kids, don't treat kids like adults'. Some literature refers to this as 'adultification'.[28]

The flip side of having to interact so often with adults, such as carers, caseworkers or social workers, is that lots of children 'missed out having connections with kids'. Being surrounded by adults all the time means 'I know how to have a conversation with them but if you put me in a classroom full of kids, I'm not talking'.

(iii) Being singled out as different

Children spoke about not wanting to be defined by their care arrangement, not wanting to be viewed as a 'resi' or 'foster kid' and all the connotations that they perceive go along with that.

> **'She treated me like a foster kid. She has all these set of rules, she's nice but she sees you as a foster child so after 18, you're out... I needed structure but she wasn't giving it to me because I was just the foster kid in her house.'**

Some children with experience of OOHC spoke about their care status marking them as different. Some said that they:

> 'find it annoying how we have to ask child safety for permission to do everything... Anything a normal kid wants to do, you just ask your parents, like travelling, sporting stuff, even just simple stuff like getting a job'.

Accessing papers that prove their legal identity – 'birth certificates and stuff' – can be frustrating because 'they hold them'. A sense of ownership over these documents was limited because 'you can take it out for a day but you have to give it back again'. Similarly, children talked about not being able to access their care plans and personal records.

> **'They should make an app for care kids to keep... notes and stuff. You can see your own case plans and stuff all on the one app so you can be on track'**

Some felt that being in care singled them out at school or in the community. One young person gave an example of struggling during Father's Day or Mother's Day, saying 'they kind of annoyed me because I just had to pretend I had normal parents'. They explained that they didn't want to have to answer questions from others about their home situation because 'then they just know that you're foster kids and then they treat you different'.

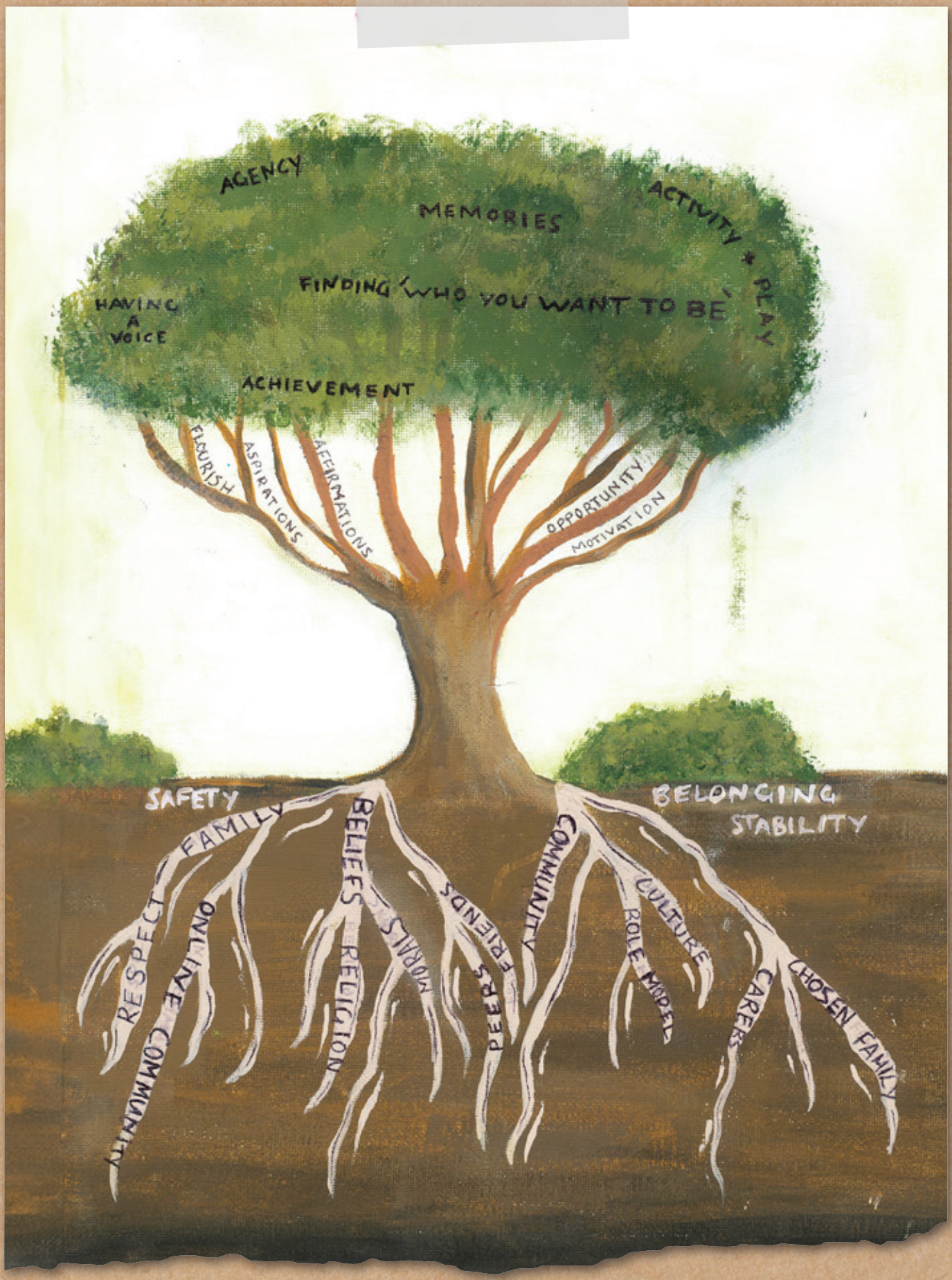
A few children spoke about the need to 'do more so that foster care kids don't stand out'. This was especially the case in settings such as school where it can be embarrassing to be different.

One participant commented 'I hate when they bring foster work into school, I like to keep that separate' and further explained 'they call me to the office for foster stuff and people think I'm in trouble'.

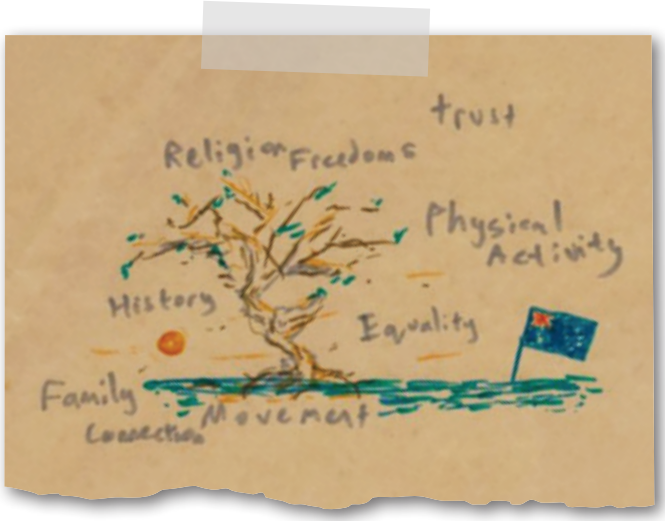
One young person spoke about having to field questions and judgement about her care arrangement in other contexts, 'I went to an optometrist recently I was with my non biological dad, my uncle... I was calling him dad in front of this lady and she said "sorry I thought this person was your guardian" and... this person didn't really get it and it felt uncomfortable'.

For some, feeling singled out was magnified by not being able to connect with people who had similar experiences. It was made worse if they felt someone really didn't know what their life was like. For example, one child said 'I hate when a counsellor says I understand what you're going through. I turn around and say, "you don't understand because you weren't there when it happened or you never lived it"'.

Discussing the above challenges helped children to reflect on what actually helped to build a positive sense of self. For example, in speaking about the transience of care or feelings of isolation, they were able to conceive the conditions that would help them build a solid foundation that would then help them to grow.


AGENCY
MEMORIES
ACTIVITY + PLAY
FINDING 'WHO YOU WANT TO BE'
HAVING A VOICE
ACHIEVEMENT
FLOURISH
ASPIRATIONS
AFFIRMATIONS
OPPORTUNITY
MOTIVATION
SAFETY
FAMILY
RESPECT
ONLINE COMMUNITY
BELIEFS
RELIGION
MORALS
PEERS
FRIENDS
COMMUNITY
BELONGING
STABILITY
CULTURE
ROLE MODEL
CARERS
CHOSEN FAMILY

5. Realising their right to identity: how children build a positive sense of self



In consultations, some children used imagery to describe identity and how identity could or should develop. 'Trees' were mentioned by some children. 'Growth' and 'growing' also came up in several consultations. Children described important facets of identity – the people, places and things – and how they related to each other. One child mentioned a 'spiders web'. Other children drew arrows in between objects and people. Children made connections between these facets and suggested there was something natural and organic about positive identity formation if the conditions were right.

With the different possibilities of connection, the youth reference group for this project (see Appendix II: Methodology) suggested considering identity as mycelia, a conception in keeping with the organic nature of identity formation. The group felt that identity could not be defined in a linear way. Furthermore, identity was, by definition, about the individual – 'like fingerprints' – who experienced the world in their own unique environment. They said that the way we look at the thoughts, ideas and stories from consultations should be seen in that light. They used mycelia to represent their recommended way of looking at the different aspects of identity because it is a fungus that exists to nourish different elements within that environment while connecting them together. They described it as:

> 'You are the fungus and you choose to nourish different nodes and different flowers, different trees and those things have their branches – and they exist because you choose to nourish that particular area of your life.'[29]

The following analysis of children's words uses the mycelia idea about connections and nourishment within the broader imagery of a tree. This is divided into three interconnected sections: the GROUND, the ROOTS and the GROWTH. The ground must be strong, comprising essential feelings and conditions – safety, stability and belonging – that a child needs to be able to develop their identity. It is the solid foundation of their sense of self. This GROUND is held together by various ROOTS that are value systems and relationships. What those specific roots are will vary from child to child. However, their function is to strengthen the ground. When the GROUND – supported by the ROOTS – is in place, then children's GROWTH can occur. When children talked about this imagery, they said that it is only when you are planted in this way that you can grow.

5.1 The Ground

The Ground: what needs to be solid for a child to form a healthy identity and positive sense of self.

One child told us that 'you have no identity until you have a ground to grow from'. Identity and a positive sense of self do not form without support. Children with lived experience of OOHC said that identity was not formed in a vacuum, but from a sense of safety, stability and belonging. It was only when these preconditions were met that – when this ground was in place – that children could discover their identity and start to develop their sense of self.

> **'If you don't have a stable environment and a sense of belonging then you can't find yourself.'**

(a) Safety

Children identified safety as being foundational for the expression of their identity. Part of this is that feeling safe means you're not spending energy worrying. Safety means that 'you can walk about and know you don't have to worry about anything happening'. Furthermore, feeling safe can push you to new horizons: 'when you feel safe you also feel brave'.

Children said that safety is about two main things: physical safety and emotional safety.

Many children said they felt safest 'at home – in my room – in my house' and that all children have a right to feel safe where they live. One child talked about safety being important to enable them to get into their 'dreaming'. Another said it was important because it was where they could be safely independent, spending time 'by myself with no one telling me what to do'.

Some children went further, saying that children also needed a 'second safe place'. For some, home could lead to 'depression, anxiety and a lot of bigger worse issues' for various reasons. For one child, school was the important second safe space, partly because there were trusted adults there.

This issue recurred, with many children saying that children needed people in their lives who 'feel safe'. One child talked about having an 'adult in your life' who is not necessarily a parent, but someone 'you can trust with everything' and who won't 'judge you about it'.

For children who raised it, 'trust' was about feeling emotionally safe. Fitting into a new home or school or community is contingent on feeling safe enough to 'share things about yourself' and 'finding someone you can trust'. One child said that this 'takes time' because 'you need to get to know them'. One of the strengths of living in a small town was that 'you get to know everyone'.

One child in OOHC said that safety was so important that children should have options to help them prioritise feeling safe in home. For example:

> 'If someone was in a foster home and their foster parents aren't the best parents, I feel like they should be able to have a resource that they can get picked up at any time because they shouldn't feel like that'.

> **'If school is our second safe place we can recover this people, we can recover this generation.'**

(b) Stability

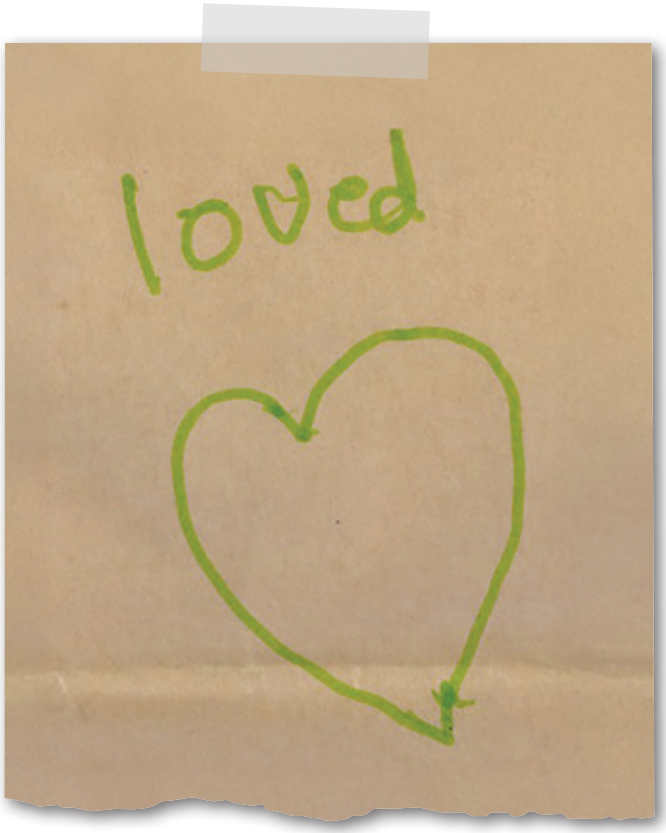
For many children we spoke to, the ground had to be stable. This was 'the main thing for me to be able to find your identity'. One child defined this in terms of their 'connections', whereby:

> 'stability in relationships and carers is a really, really big thing... I feel like they shouldn't remove staff from houses and stuff like that because it happened quite a bit with us, where we've had staff leave and that kind of stuff.'

Routine, as part of stability, was regarded as being so important that 'if anyone doesn't have a stable routine, you're going to struggle'. One child said that this was important for any person, 'not just a young person'. There was a feeling that because 'everyone has a routine', it should not be taken for granted and should be considered fundamental for children living in OOHC.

(c) Belonging

For children, having a ground to grow from meant 'belonging somewhere'. This was both from an external perspective – 'Belonging is another way of saying accepted. If you belong, you're accepted' – and internal perspective – 'Belonging. Your own perception of who you are' and 'what they think of themselves'. For the most part, children talked about how these perspectives came together around relationships, because 'when you have people around [who] you feel that you belong with, it really helps you.'



For some children, feeling a sense of belonging with 'the people around them, their friends and family' meant that they could 'create that identity with everyone else'. This suggests that connecting with people was important for belonging, but also that what friends are family 'are interested in' and how they 'express themselves' can influence formation of children's identity.

This is consistent with literature that suggests 'engagement with community, beyond school and family, is essential for children's sense of belonging'.[30]

'Belonging' also draws together the other aspects of the ground children need to grow from: safety and stability. For one child, belonging 'keeps you safe, I guess'. A child with lived experience of OOHC suggested that their need for belonging was almost instinctive: 'all I ever felt when I was a little kid was I wanted to belong in a house where I was cared for'. Another child suggested that this sense has to be developed. They said that it could be hard for children living in OOHC to express themselves because they 'haven't really been taught resilience and therefore they can't find their ground to be able to find their sense of belonging'.

Another child reflected on their experience of moving around to different residential care homes and the impact that had on their development. When they finally came to a 'good foster home', they experienced 'a different sense of identity'. Again, the key tenets of a ground to grow from need to be developed together.

> **'I was taught by my parents to make people feel like they belong here. Everyone belongs here.'**

Time

The ground to grow from cannot be established quickly. Children said that stability, safety and belonging take time to develop, as do their roots. Part of the strength of these roots – and therefore the ground – is that they are formed over time.

For example, 'friends are important because you know them over a long period of time'. Building a 'proper relationship' takes 'a lot of time'. Likewise, children said that belonging can take time, because it's a matter of 'getting used to it, understanding what's around you... spending time in one place'. In the same vein, 'to build trust takes time' because it's about feeling comfortable and feeling you 'can be more yourself'. Raising the issue of the time factor highlights that identity formation is as much about process as result.

5.2 The Roots

The Roots: the value systems and relationships that strengthen the GROUND, together providing the conditions for children's identity formation.

> **'I think a ground to grow from for me, is a home, somewhere to belong, with people, doesn't have to be blood, but people who support you and are willing to teach you in terms of building relationships and helping you try new things so that you can find your own identity.'**

This ground to grow from, according to the children we spoke to, is based on interconnected roots – the relationships and value-systems – that underpin everything else in our lives. Children raised several different relationships and value-systems as being critical to their sense of belonging, their feelings of safety and their stability.

There was not universal agreement about these roots across the consultations. The various different possibilities seemed to have differing importance from child to child. Not all of these relationships and values had to be in place for children to feel that the ground had been laid for identity-formation. For example, for some children, the biological or nuclear family was not central to their identity. These children felt feelings of stability, safety and belonging rooted in their chosen family, their friends and peers in other groups, like sports clubs.

As per the imagery of the mycelia suggested by our youth reference group, these roots complement and sometimes compensate for one another. To survive, you may develop in some areas to balance out stunted areas.

Looking at the roots this way helps to make sense of the way children talked about formation of identity. That is, identity is holistic, with a number of interconnected components.

As they talked to us, children made the connections between their relationships and their values, and how those things impacted the way they saw and experienced the world. In this way, the roots of their identities were interdependent and indivisible.

> **'I think the way you connect with people and who you surround yourself with really makes you who you are.'**

One idea that came up again and again across consultations was that of connection with others. Children want to be able to connect with 'someone to trust, someone who's loyal. Someone who will never break them'. One child also talked about 'feeling respected and trusted' in relationships, highlighting that connections are a two-way street.

These connections can come from a number of different avenues – family, carers, chosen family, friends – but it is the connection that was important to children. One child talked about this as needing a 'rock' – someone to rely on, who is always there. They spoke about this as being a universal fact.

(a) Community

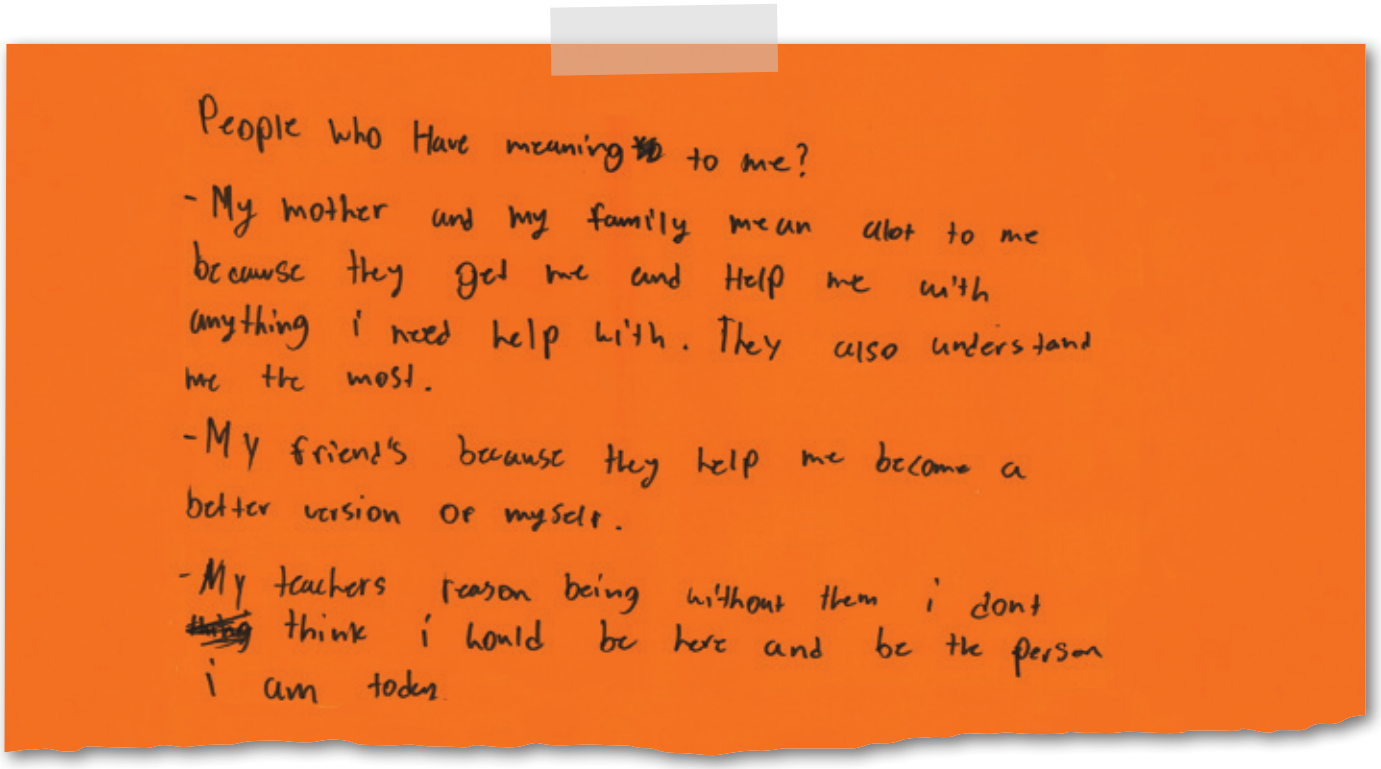
> **'Community is really important, especially as an adolescent, to how you build your own sense of self.'**

Some children talked about the communities they lived in as providing connections. One child said that 'people who make me who I am is the community around me'. This could be 'my neighbours and family, mum and dog, people who I hang out with outside of school, friends not from school'.

Some children tied community in with the concept of safety; that if you're 'in the right community you learn the right things' and it can be 'a safe environment'. Having a 'safer community' required 'a few adults that are trusted and they can talk to them about like a weekly or daily basis just to relieve their emotions and make them feel safe', which is suggestive of mentorship and coaching.

Mentors

Some children referred to trusted adults as 'mentors', particularly 'when you have something important to speak about'. One child defined mentorship as being 'about building that relationship of trust in a healthy, safe space where a young person feels loved and appreciated, which is quite beneficial'. Some children were positive about formal mentorship arrangements, like the 'Be Mentors' program. Of their mentor relationship, one child said that it helped them to 'feel brave' and helped them to 'get along with my family', start a fitness program and learn respect, and 'not go straight to being defensive and swearing'.



Many children invoked the idea of community in wanting to spend time with 'people that have been in similar situations to me'. They see the common experience as creating allyship and understanding 'because you've both been through the same thing so you can have a friendship'. A 'mini-community', with a wider circle of people than school could offer, gave more opportunities to 'talk about how you're going and some of the things you've gone through'. For example, another child talked about sitting 'around together with other kids who have queer parents' and feeling 'lucky to have' that community.

> **'You connect better with people who have the same things as you or look the same as you because you both understand the experiences you both have been through, like discrimination or being outcasted.'**

Other children discussed the idea of how community support for specific needs or experiences can be important for the formation of identity. One child talked about groups for children who were homeschooled and neurodivergent children – and that specific groups could help them understand who they are. Someone else said that these kind of groups might be important to help children learn how to behave socially by socialising, because 'a lot of times they aren't given a chance to learn or to be accepted and like get friends and get treated like everyone else'.

Similarly, 'feeling accepted' by others was important because 'if you don't feel like you fit in you don't feel normal'. Finding ways to help children connect with others and fit into a group was important to identity formation over time, with one child saying:

> 'I think the best thing to do to have a good adulthood is to have a good childhood, so I would think to make a good childhood is to not feel left out'.

Children talked about the importance of community and community-based facilities and activities as a substitute for home, especially 'when parents are not looking after them or doing the right thing' or 'if your parents are at work'. Several groups from across the country cited PCYC as a good example, offering the 'only free sport in town' in some areas, and sometimes providing 'free dinner'. One child made the point that PCYC may not be open every day, not as a way of criticising the PCYC, but simply to raise the point that there should be 'more places around town for kids to go'.

Some children spoke about the value of having places in the community for children 'where they don't get into trouble and stuff'. This was especially important for children in smaller regional or remote towns. One child in a remote area argued that there should be more community facilities where 'people can go there and have fun with their friends, meet new people and just explore'.

Children talked about simple solutions to improve facilities so that they are more appealing for children to use. One group talked about building a better skate park so 'we could use it like a community meeting area'. Likewise, other groups talked about putting 'shade around the pool', or making 'the library bigger' so more kids had space to read.

There was also a call from some children for local government to support ways for children to feel part of their community. These included 'community outings' and events like a 'nightclub for the youth'. One child also thought that workshops:

> 'would be a great as it would bring the community together and everyone would know each other. It would lead to less domestic violence, hate and crime because everyone would know everyone. Would help dismantle the barriers put by enforcing labels on everyone too.'

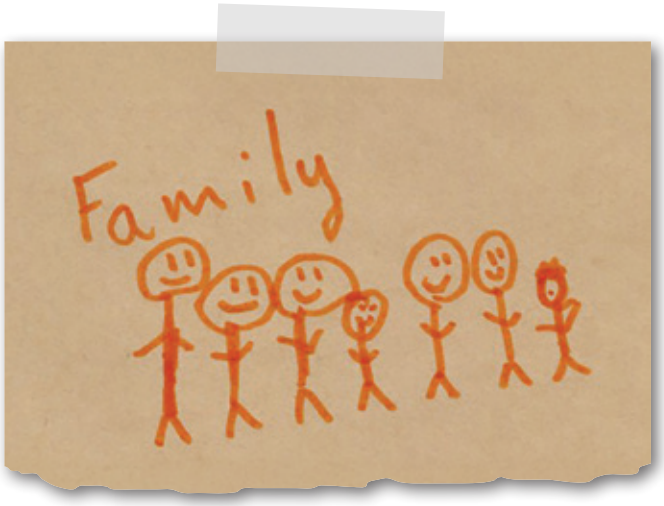
(b) Online community

Some children said it was easier to express themselves online and that online platforms provided the interpersonal connections they needed. In terms of identity:

> 'you've kind of just got a whole community full of people that don't really know you, so you have the option to present yourself in way you want other people to address you that may not know you personally.'

The anonymity of this arrangement could itself be empowering, giving agency to the child because 'I am expressing to them who I want to be perceived as, and that's how they perceive me'.

> **'[The] disco space was one of the best things... the amount of people that were there, I didn't feel alone cause like if I was at home I probably would have been in my room, even though I didn't really talk to anyone I wasn't comfortable right away, but I knew there were people around I could talk to if I wanted to. If I wanted to meet someone new I could have any point in time I could have thought I need a friend or whatever, knowing that they exist makes life so much easier.'**



(c) Family

Children talked about the value of family to their stability, safety and belonging – but it had to be an active relationship. Some children insisted that family had to be a place of 'trust' and 'love' and every child needed 'a family with dedication, a family with good intentions of actually helping you grow'.

Many children talked about the family being a big part of their identity because 'they make you feel loved… like you belong'. For some children, parents provided stability in their lives: '…when I live with my mum, that's the one person I came to after school. That's stability. I felt very sure of myself'. Parents were important to stability because 'they're the people who stay'.

Similarly, some children highlighted the role of siblings in their sense of belonging 'because they were the main people I got raised with, I've been with them the whole way'. With families, 'you're with people that get you' and have 'some sort of bond with them'.

For many children, family – or a 'stable household' – is the setting for learning life skills that 'prepare you for the future' or even 'for when you get your own house'. This includes 'cooking, doing chores at home, cleaning the house'. For some children it is also where they learn routine and discipline.

Some children said that parents should provide the 'ingredients, like funding for things like education and things they're interested in'. They suggested that this attention to their education was critical for children to 'help themselves find themselves, in terms of experiencing things they've never gotten to experience'.

What children need from parental figures is an adult 'just accepting you and always being able to rely on them no matter what'.

> **'My family encourages me to be whoever I want to be.'**

(d) Chosen family

Many children highlighted the importance of family – especially for belonging and stability – but said that you can 'choose' or 'find your own family'. One child talked about this in reference to their experience in OOHC, saying that when you go to a refuge 'you don't normally have anything, you don't have people around you' so you have to be intentional in finding your own family.

Children often returned to the idea of the household as opposed to a family per se, saying 'it has to be people that you trust and that you can rely on… people that care for you and you care for them'. Some children spoke about the importance of pets in creating a sense of belonging. They said that 'pets are like family even though they might not speak back to you they can understand when you are feeling down or happy'. Taking care and responsibility for pets also gave some children a purpose and role which added to their sense of self.

> **'I've got two fish (Michael and Jordan) and it's given me a purpose at home, I have someone to look after – not just me. When you have the feeling of looking after something and you do the right thing and it's growing up healthy, it's happy. It gives you some sort of spark of joy to see your dog wagging its tail ready to greet you at the door.'**

For many children, 'friends are kind of like… the family that you choose' and, over time, 'become family'. One child in OOHC embraced the idea of everyone in their life being their family in some way: 'I think of my family as a spider web… they are all connected'. Some children said that foster parents are the same as family, with one child saying that they didn't even think of their mum as a foster parent anymore.

(e) Carers

For many of the children we spoke to, if some children could not rely on family, carers should provide the stability that they need. Residential care homes can be 'chaos' when stability should be the status quo. Several children raised the issue of constancy being important in OOHC care arrangements and said authorities 'shouldn't remove staff from houses' because children need to bond. Children talked about not being consulted when staff had to leave and not being able to 'say goodbye'.

One child with experience in OOHC said that this issue is about 'parental relationships, someone who can give me a sense of belonging' and someone at home they could be 'comfortable with'. The constant, parental-style figure was important here. This person said that when they finally had this relationship – after several years of moving and disruption – they started 'doing amazing at school'. This was not to attribute academic success to their carer, but making the point that the carer 'gave me a ground I can grow from'. They said that they have 'a different sense of identity now that I'm in a good foster home'.

> **'I was removed from my siblings and moved around and had different carers. I never used to be very good in school, didn't know what I wanted to do, I had bad mental health, but then as soon as I had stability.... Now... my siblings and I are permanently together, I don't worry about where I am going to be, I can focus on school. I can grow a relationship with a carer without moving. Building relationships helps your self-identity.'**

(f) Friends and peers

Children said that they know when they are in the company of friends they belong with because 'you can be your true self'. Friends 'are a big part of who you are', 'make you feel loved and like you belong', 'comfort each other', and 'are always there for you when you need help'. A good friendship is where 'you connect easily' and 'you don't put each other down, like you're actually genuinely happy'. Friends can also be part of your chosen family: 'I treat them like brothers'.

Children talked about how the feeling you have with friends is something 'you can't get anywhere else'. Children talked about their peers as being able to understand you in ways that older people might not. Sharing experiences with friends and finding connections with peers with similar experiences was an important way of exploring identity.

Again, the issue of time arose when discussing friends. For many children, friends had value 'because some friends have been with you your whole life, there's been ups and downs always, but we've always been together'.

Some children who had lived in OOHC highlighted the importance of the constancy of friendship, because they knew what it felt like not to have that. Another child had observed that it was hard for children who were constantly moving – between homes, across communities or even around the world – 'because they might make a friend and then move to another school and make a friend and move again. It's really hard for them'.

> **'I have to build that friendship and connection with someone before I totally open up... You have to know someone for a little bit before you can fully tell them your life story.'**

Friendships can expand the world of a child, and children talked about the importance of this in helping them to develop a sense of self. When children get to know friends, 'you can learn the way they see the world, their perception of the world and it can rub off on you'. One child went further and suggested that this can mean that groups of friends 'can all have the same identity', albeit with 'not exactly the same backstories and stuff'. For them, this meant commonalities in 'the way that you adapt and see stuff' – so the interaction of friends is influential in identity formation as shared interests and experiences.

(g) Role models for values

Some children also said that role models were important 'because they teach you your values'. This can be from a religious perspective or not. For example, Taylor Swift was raised a lot during consultations, not just because of her music, but because 'she's kind and brave, comfortable with who she is and stays strong on who she is'. For some, having a role model was about how to 'make me a better person'. Some First Nations children mentioned well-known First Nations people, particularly sports stars, as role models. This resonates with a recent study about First Nations role models being important to the development of children's identity.[31]

One child talked about a boxer being a good role model. They did not particularly enjoy the game, but said that:

> 'they have it the hardest. They get into fights. They have to fight all the time. They know what they're fighting for. There's something to learn in the fight.'

While sports players, musicians and influencers were popular role models, some children cautioned against idolising people you see on social media. Some children talked about how much they engaged with social media, with others expressing some scepticism as to how seriously they would take social media influencers. Seeing someone online meant that 'you never get to know their true side. They could just be acting'. Some children were more comfortable with role models in real life 'because you see their true colours'.

Role models and shared experience.

Some children do not have a safe and stable home life and have not had access to value systems that might help to make sense of their feelings. One young person in OOHC shared their story, which was replete with neglect and maltreatment. They described a parent dying and remembered thinking 'there was nothing left for me'. They turned to the music of Ed Sheeran, with one song's lyrics resonating particularly, saying 'all the ones that love me they just left me on the shelf'. This child described the music as something to hold on to because they identified with it. Someone else felt what they had felt.

(h) Beliefs, morals and religion

Children discussed beliefs as being critical to development, 'especially becoming independent, you need to know what you value, your morals and beliefs – knowing that and having a set idea of what that is to you is important'.

Several children talked about identity being rooted in a moral code, giving rise to ethics and a sense of responsibility, because 'morals... kind of make or break a person'.

Some children named particular morals, ethics and values that were important to their identity, including 'responsibility... for your actions', 'being empathetic', and 'being strong in yourself'.

To find a place in value systems, some children pointed to growing up 'around people with certain religions'. There was also a view about this being a process of discovery in which:

> 'you have to go through things, experience things, and after that you find out what you believe in, find out what you value, find out what you think is right and wrong you have to go through stuff first'.

For some children, 'you get your values from religion'. This includes learning 'how you should treat others'. They also talked about the rules and boundaries religion can provide, insofar as 'It can stop you from doing certain things', or 'it can influence sometimes how you dress'. One child said that believing in God 'takes us in the right way, not the wrong way'.

For some, there was also the importance of religion to family and culture, because it 'just been passed on down so many generations... that's a big part of how you show who you are'. Preserving that and being part of that was important to these children. One child said, 'I like spending time with family going to church'.

Some children also talked about how organised religion gave them a sense of place. One child said that going to a place of worship 'helps me be connected with people around me'. Another talked about places of worship as centres for civic responsibility by 'raising money to help other people, fund projects'.

For children from migrant backgrounds, beliefs were essential in understanding their journeys, talking about 'prayers getting answered' with 'better opportunities... in a big country like Australia'.

One child talked about belief helping them to find 'the right solution' to problems and to keep things in perspective, because 'God wouldn't put you through something that you wouldn't be able to handle'.

(i) Culture

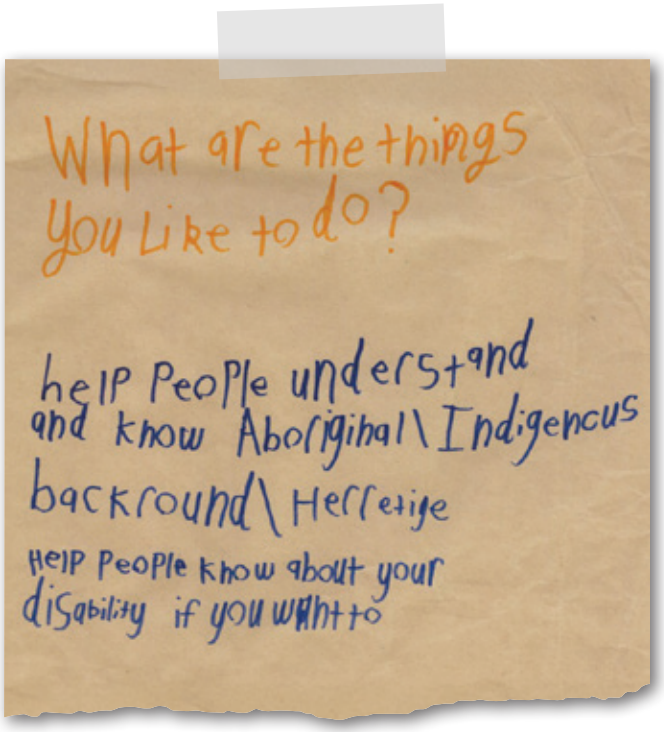
> **‘They need culture. They need culture so they can be themselves. If you don’t have culture… you don’t have any roles.’**

> **‘Culture is who you are…’. Many children talked about the importance of culture to them, because ‘it extends your identity’ and gives them ‘a sense of connection’.**

Culture was predominantly raised by First Nations children and culturally and racially marginalised children. Some children also said that culture did not ‘really matter’ to them or that they did not really have ’much of a cultural background’. Literature suggests that there is a lack of accurate reporting and data in relation to the number of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in OOHC. Currently, national reporting takes place in relation to cultural care plans for First Nations children, but this has not yet been extended to include cultural care planning for other children[32] to ensure that all children have opportunities to connect to their culture. Another child, who had not had opportunity to connect to their Southeast Asian culture, commented, ‘I guess I don’t know much about that stuff’ and conveyed ‘it’s not important, not something that means something to me’.

Of the children who raised it, they defined culture as being ‘where you are from‘, which also comes up in the literature[33]. Other children said that culture is ‘who you are’, ‘what you’ve grown up around’, and ‘what you believe in’. For many children, culture is where connections and value systems intersected. It was important for them to be strong in culture because it ‘helps you be kinder and stick to morals’, ‘keeps you and other people safe’, ‘helps you believe in yourself‘, ‘helps you meet new people’, and ‘helps you be a better person’.

For these children, culture was critical to their sense of belonging. They valued ‘growing up with culture’ for the way it ‘helps kids connect with their parents’, ‘keeps me connected to my family’ and ‘brings the family closer’. Some valued culture ‘because it’s all a big family. You feel welcome and… it’s free to talk to anybody’. With culture, ‘everyone is connected’, giving ‘a sense of community’.



Therefore, one child said that ‘Culture is bigger than family, because you can have the same culture as someone and not be related to them’.

This could engender a feeling of safety. With connection, culture can ‘get your families close and bring everyone closer and feel safer’. There is always ‘someone in your culture you can talk to’.

That sense of belonging also related to ‘fitting in’ and having a sense of place with their culture. They learnt that ‘most people have different roles in most cultures’.

Children said that learning about culture was important to their identity formation. For those in OOHC, carers helped them to connect with culture, and for those at home, their families helped. Children talked about cultural activities and needing regular and frequent touch points to express and explore their culture, like dancing. In some regional and remote areas, children talked about camping, hunting and fishing with uncles (‘but you have to be a certain age’) and skittles (‘a Torres Strait game’). Some children mentioned yarning circles outside schools that helped them to connect with others, and also helped with their schoolwork. Several groups also talked about celebrating culture during NAIDOC week.

Some of these children also talked about ‘learning about your history’ and being part of how culture carries on, being aware that their ‘family brings it with them and passes it on to the kids’. Some also talked about how it was bigger than them

'because it tells you about past and present'. The feeling of belonging in a story resonated with some children as it 'makes you have some sort of past. Celebrations and events that happened long ago... might have some significance of what you believe'. One child said that if you learn this then you 'have all the information about yourself'.

Some children said that it was important to share their culture with others from outside it. One child living in OOHC said they 'like telling stories about my culture' with her friend's family 'and I inform them about safety protocols'. Sharing culture with friends – 'like taking them out in the flat and the scrub and show them the things of our ancestors' – helps to 'explain your identity'.

One child wanted to be clear that culture doesn't homogenise a group of people – 'not everyone is exact same same' – but it can help to make 'friendships closer, when they can bond over the same culture'. Embracing your culture was important to 'being open minded' and understanding other people's culture, which underlines the issues of respect that children also raised.

> **Culture is 'important 'cos it's my culture... it's life'.**

(j) Respect

Several children talked about respect as being important to identity, in three different ways. The first was 'that you should respect everyone' as a baseline rule. Some children said that this was a lesson they learned on the playing fields, that 'it's respectful to be a good sport', even when you lose the game. One child said that 'showing respect to other people... fills up people's buckets'. This again highlights the importance of connection to development identity and a sense of self. Similarly, some children linked respect to kindness and positivity, because 'it just rubs off on people when you are kind'. This is about 'treating others how you would like to be treated'.

This related to the second aspect of respect, which is being respected themselves. Children said that it was important for them to feel respected. This was partly about living with someone or being cared for by someone who 'knows how to speak to me properly'. Many groups also discussed respect in terms of affirmation and 'when they've done something they should be respected for it'. These children said it was about 'feeling valued'.

> **'My teachers think my drawing is excellent. It feels like I'm proud of myself.'**

> **'What helps someone is to tell them that they are good enough and they can do it and not tell them they are not good enough. To tell them that they'll be there for them in life if they need any help just come to me, to tell them good things, positive things.'**

This sort of feedback from trusted adults was important to developing a sense of self-worth, the third way that respect contributes to identity formation. 'Having respect for yourself, having self-respect' goes some way to helping children 'not be hard on yourself'. 'Being confident' and 'being humble' were ways children identified to help grow self-respect, while others went full circle, saying that being respectful of others 'gives you a sense of self-worth'.

> **'Being respected, therefore goes back to you respecting yourself, and respecting yourself gives you more confidence and lets you go for more opportunities.'**

Some children talked about feeling respected and respecting themselves as foundational – as a root to support the ground – while others felt it helped to nourish their growth and sense of self.

Agency

The idea of agency came up in consultations. Many children suggested that agency emerges alongside confidence, as children develop their identity. That is, agency is the result of a positive sense of self being formed. However, some children wondered if there was some exercise – or at least sense of agency – as part of the roots of identity. That is, there is some element of choice about what roots will support the ground of a child's identity. For example, 'changing friend groups that are just toxic. I feel like that could be a good change... as you could find people where you can actually feel like yourself'.

5.3 ...and the roots continue to nourish and inform

> **'And not just have a ground, but they water you so you can grow so that you can find your own sense of identity. 'Cos, really, it is up to you.'**

Returning to the youth reference group's idea about representing the aspects of identity formation as mycelia, the relationships and value systems that formed the roots of identity also serve to nourish growth. That is, as well as being an important part of the solid ground, they also helped to nourish aspects of their sense of self.

For the youth reference group, this spoke to two key issues fundamental to growth. The first was the longevity of key relationships and value systems. As well as being formative, they were dynamic and changed in meaning as the child grows. Over time, these roots had the potential to continue to nourish and provide opportunities for a young person to reciprocate. Relationships with other people and 'the way you connect with people and who you surround yourself with really makes you who you are'. Furthermore, some trusted relationships can be a testing ground for ideas and expanding horizons. For example, 'with friends you can be more controversial'. In the company of friends, 'you can be your true self'.

This was related to the second issue, which was agency. The youth reference group said that the more children grow into their identity, the more they have the agency and competencies to pick and choose which parts of themselves they want to nourish, and which other actors or value systems – which ROOTS – they want to draw on. This idea is in keeping with a child rights-based approach, in terms of respecting the 'evolving capacities' of the child (Article 5 of the CRC) and the right to express views 'in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' (Article 12).

> **'People inspire you to be special.'**

5.4 The Growth

The Growth: what children need to grow and shape their identity and sense of self, from The GROUND, with the support of their ROOTS.

It is only when a child has that solid 'ground to grow' from that they can build a positive sense of self and that a healthy identity can actively and sub-consciously be formed.

Children spoke about forming and expressing an identity which was uniquely theirs. They explained that this was built through a process of 'trial and error'. It is only when you have safety and stability that you have confidence to branch out, take risks, 'try new things' and form connections safe in the knowledge that you have a stable base to return to.

The growth is about reaching, building, expanding, developing and claiming your own space. As one child described:

> 'The ability to express yourself in a unique way that's you.'

(a) Agency

Many children described identity formation as an active process, explaining that you 'find your own identity'. They explained that this can take time and space, with one young person commenting '...when you're by yourself, you find out who you are'. This requires children being resourced, supported and empowered to take opportunities to engage in the world around them.

Many children spoke about the importance of being able to express themselves in the way they wanted to, whether this was how they dressed, the music they listened to, or through having a creative outlet. They said that children 'should be able to choose' what they wear and have some influence over the physical spaces they inhibit, such as their bedrooms. One child in OOHC reflected on how important it was to her to be able to choose her own clothes:

> 'I get to go out and buy my own clothes. I feel like that kind of stuff should continue. At [this organisation] we actually didn't have to shop at Kmart, we just got a budget, and we could shop anywhere'.

Children also advocated for having a say in how their bedrooms were decorated. They agreed that making choices was important, 'your interests, like

type of music, the things you like is very important to identity, like knowing the things you like to do'.

Exercising some choice and control is a big part of finding out who you are. This can range from decisions about what subjects you study at school to whether you follow a religion, to what activities you do in your spare time. Being able to experiment is important to find things that fit. One child explained:

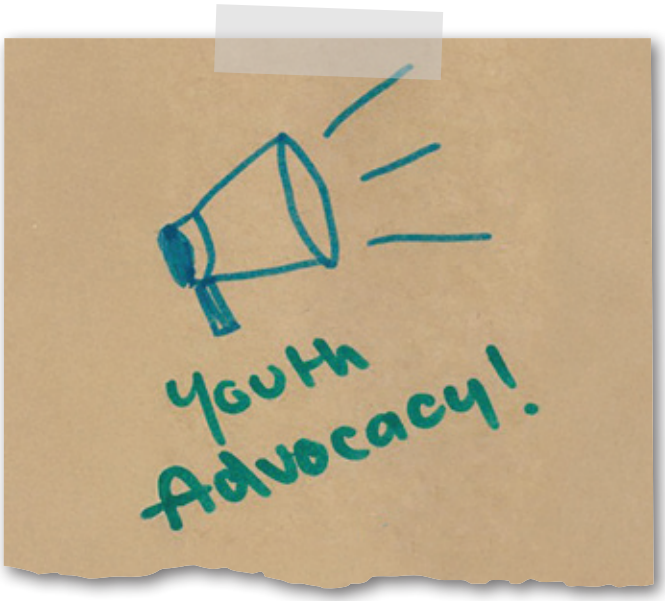
> 'you have your own likes and dislikes, your hobbies and things you like to do, so having an opportunity to have them and not having them controlled is a big reason as to why you are who you are'.

Many children with experiences of OOHC spoke about a lack of control and choice in these aspects of their lives. They said that this stifled their ability to express themselves.

They described feeling as though decisions were made for, and about, them with little input from them, in ways which felt 'random'. For example, whether they receive funding for activities, whether they were able to see family, or engage in programs such as mentoring. They described case planning processes that failed to take into account their views and needs. These children advocated for more say and input into their lives to avoid them 'floating out there not knowing exactly what's going on'. Some wanted more choice in 'where they are placed and who they work with and who they live with. I definitely feel we should have some say in that.'

> **'They should let you have a say in what you're going to do. If we are going to do something- a meeting, like with my mentor, I don't get told. I randomly stopped having a mentor, they randomly stopped funding it and other things too- I wanted to see my brother, there is nothing against seeing my brother, there's a lot of other things. No one ever asked me if I wanted a mentor, if I want to stay with family'.**

While some children advocated for more say and control in aspects of their lives, others stressed that they did not want to be burdened with adult responsibilities and spoke of the need to 'treat kids like kids, don't treat kids like adults'. Most



agreed on the need for appropriate protection, boundaries and guidance. This foundational support enabled children to be active agents in their own lives. They spoke about safe and positive connections helping to make you brave, introduce you to new things and acting as powerful role models.

(b) Having a voice

Many children agreed that **'**having a say in your life is important'. Having people around you willing to listen to and take your views seriously can help children to form a positive sense of themselves and the world around them.

Having our own opinions and being able to express these is key to what makes us human and is a fundamental human right. As one group of young people argued 'opinions are how we separate ourselves from AI... subjective judgement. It's what makes it hard to replicate the human experience with AI. Our opinions are our identity'.

Children spoke of the importance of having a voice in their own lives, advocating for themselves and also for others in their community. Children who were involved in youth advocacy, advisory councils, or student groups, spoke about these being a way to 'share your knowledge and experience', and a forum where 'we help, we get help and support when we need it'. These children spoke positively about such processes as important in keeping children safe and making sure that their needs and interests are considered.

This involvement also became a key part of how many of these children saw themselves, as worthy

contributors, as having something valuable to share and feeling confident and respected. 'I can be comfortable with people that respect me'.

Having processes for children to be heard is especially important for children in care. A child in OOHC explained:

> 'voices should be heard, the carer's voice should be heard, the young person's voice should be heard. There is so much conflict that is happening in foster houses and in residential homes that just doesn't need to be happening that could be avoided'.

They stressed the importance of taking children's views seriously, to 'actually listen, half the time kids will express themselves and say how they feel but they don't feel heard because what they say is never taken seriously'.

This emphasises the importance of not only listening to children but taking appropriate action. This is consistent with the CRC, which emphasises that listening to children 'shouldn't be seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means... to the implementation of children's rights'.[34] The right to a voice is a gateway right.

It is also critical to provide different ways to involve children, especially quieter voices. This involves creating 'more places for children to express themselves' where children 'know that they are valued and shouldn't be afraid to say whatever you want to say'.

Many participants spoke about art, play and music as good ways to engage with children, with one participant explaining that singing helps them because 'it has lots of emotions'. However children choose to express themselves, it can be an important way to share their experience and encourage their growth.

> **'...if someone sung a song that represents their past and it can help their future'.**

Children having opportunities to participate in broader advocacy, such as with organisations like CREATE, is also important. One child in OOHC commented that she felt passionate about influencing systemic issues such as 'the mixing of children' or 'placement of children' in residential care settings. She explained that she was involved with a peak youth advisory group because she wanted to improve things for others based on 'a lot of things from my experience'. She spoke of her experience of living with PTSD and being placed in a residential care setting with a young person with 'high risk disability' who was violent. She said that she wanted to avoid such practices for 'children who are like me, who are quiet, and they aren't as violent and they aren't as loud'.

> **'I'm actually very angry at the system and how its treated me. But that doesn't mean I want to turn away from it and be like 'whatever'. I want to make it different, I want to tell people what I've had to deal with and I want it to change, because I don't want other people to go through that as well.'**

(c) Aspirations, finding 'who you want to be'

Having goals, hopes and plans for the future were often important to how children viewed themselves. They explained that aspirations can keep you motivated, give you a purpose and something to strive for. As one young person explained 'when you complete a goal, it's a great feeling. I think a goal is very important'.

Many children spoke about the importance of having a 'muse' or 'someone to look up to' as a source of inspiration and encouragement. They spoke about how powerful it can be to 'see someone do something amazing and you just want to do it as well'.

One child living in OOHC identified an older sibling as a positive influence in her life, commenting:

> 'I respect her a lot and everything she does and she's got a lot of degrees so I mean I want to grow up to be just like her, cause she's kind of my idol.'

(d) Role models for motivation

Several groups of children discussed the idea of role models – 'people to look up to' – and the way they help to shape identity. These role models were from their day-to-day lives – including parents, friends, teachers and sport coaches – and their online lives – including sports stars, musicians, actors and other influencers.

> **'Who are the people who make you who you are? Someone who you strive to be like could be someone to push you to continue doing what you like to do, or even if you don't like to do said thing, an idol may be someone you look up to, to motivate you.'**

Children talked a lot about how their aspirations were reflected in their role models, especially when their role models – their 'idols' – were famous. They helped to shape identity because 'they inspire you to do your dreams' and their example could help you 'set goals for yourself'. One child said that by having someone to look up to, 'you can ask them to help you'. In the case of music, one person said that a role model was essential because they can show you 'how to create things'.

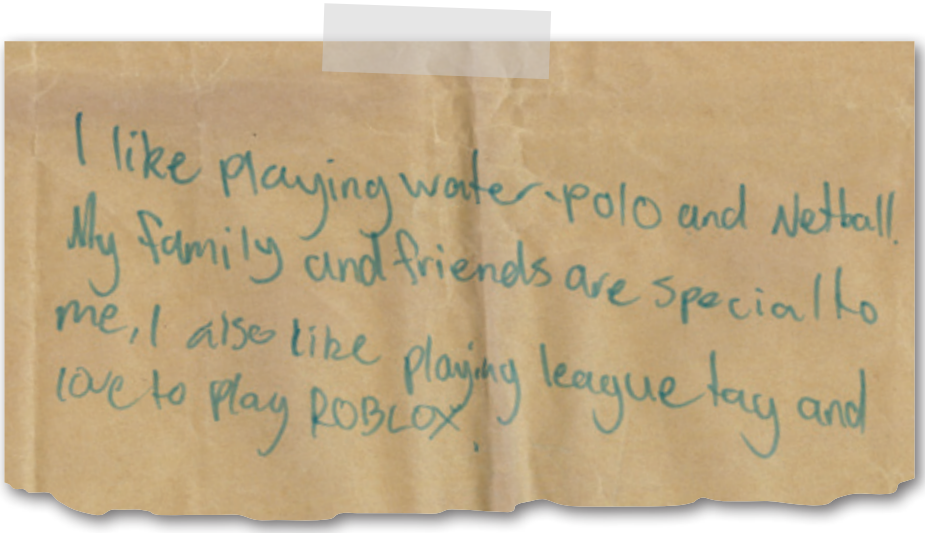
Famous role models

Children identified many famous figures as role models. These included a diverse range of people, such as actors, politicians, historical figures as well as sport stars and musicians. Names commonly raised by children included: Latrell Mitchell, Nathan Cleary, LeBron James, Shaq O'Neill, Lionel Messi, Sam Kerr, Michael Jordan, John Roper, Kalyn Ponga, Eminem, Billie Eilish, Ed Sheeran, Taylor Swift.

Many children spoke of their aims for the future, who they wanted to be when they grew up. 'I know what I want to do when I grow up. I want to be a pilot'. Often these ideas for the future were based on exposure to role models and influences around them, with one child stating 'I'll do the same thing as my foster carer does'. Connections often influence what you believe is possible for yourself, whether this is further study, travel or other pursuits.

Some children spoke about the importance of having hope for the future and a sense that things could change for the better. They said that 'if you have something to aim towards it can keep you going' through difficult times. Having people who believe in, and help, you towards goals is also critical. One child described how this support can sustain you:

> 'knowing I can do it myself, having support around, being engaged, and having the energy to do it. I wake up every morning thinking I don't want to go to school but I get up and go because... today I want to be a different day'.



> **'It's very good to have good connections and relationships with the people that you hold dear to you because that will be useful in future.'**

Some children in OOHC spoke about looking forward to being independent and leaving care. They talked about the freedom associated with this as 'you can do more if you're independent, like you're not necessarily tied down by anyone or anything'. They spoke of plans to live independently or to 'get my licence so I can actually get out of town do something that's better'. For others, the idea of leaving care was 'nerve wracking', especially if they lacked a support structure to assist with future needs such as housing, independent living and finding employment.

Ensuring that all children have plans and support for the future is critical, including access to appropriate mentors or services which can equip them for independent living. Children talked about things that would help, such as learning to cook, to drive, to change a tyre 'good skills that most kids should know... they might not know who to ask that stuff'. These skills can influence self-image, in that children can see themselves as capable and confident rights holders.

(e) Opportunity, activity and play

Many children spoke about the importance of fun and play in fostering a healthy sense of self. They described this as 'actually having a life. Not being home all the time and doing the same thing over and over again.' They said that such activity would 'keep them busy' and was a distraction when things were stressful or hard at home. One child explained that 'everyone needs a distraction in their life, so they don't have to worry about the things they go through'.

For some children this involved unstructured activity such as climbing trees, video games, hula hooping, creating lego, reading books or anime. Some preferred individual activities, while others spoke about the value of interacting with peers. Some talked about pets, noting that 'I feel happy when I play with pets' that they make you 'less grumpy' and are important to 'spend time with'. One child spoke about the importance of games, 'being able to connect with others and have fun is really important to who I am and probably to a lot of other people'. Children gave multiple examples of games and activity, including 'tech stuff' (like Roblox, Minecraft, Fortnite and PlayStation) as well as creative, active and sporting games.

The importance of play and recreation to wellbeing is now widely understood. Play has a significant role in a child's development, it is through play that children 'explore and experience the world around them, experiment with new ideas, roles and experiences and in so doing learn to understand and construct their social position within the world'.[35] Opportunities for play and leisure are a key right for children. It is a central part of childhood and impacts on all aspects of development.

Children talked about the value of being supported to get out and do things. They advocated for opportunities in their community - such as free sport, art classes and places to go. Many seemed mindful that cost was prohibitive and made suggestions to 'make sport free', to provide 'more financial support- like if you love swimming and it's too expensive to do lessons often'. They also spoke about the importance of investment in youth facilities, playgrounds, swimming pools, sport centres and youth groups for children 'so they have something to do'. These opportunities can bring people together to 'share that interest and build those passions'.

> **'Support passions... making sure there are opportunities, free sport... making sure people get to do what they are passionate about'**

Children argued that opportunities to find and follow their passions should be available to all children, as 'getting these opportunities would help other kids in care a lot'. Children in OOHC stressed that they should not miss out on these experiences, noting 'kids in foster care should be able to have the same things to do, be able to do as kids that have parents'. The youth reference group highlighted that children in OOHC have, by virtue of the care experience, experienced the absence of certain rights. Ensuring they are able to claim other rights is therefore especially important.

> **'Finding something that they enjoy, just anything, a sport, a hobby, something that they really enjoy that they can do and feel good about 'cos without that they probably will feel like they don't have anything but if you have that one thing that you can stick to and enjoy that's helpful.'**

(f) Achievement and mastery

Often children described themselves by talking about what they were good at or loved to do, for example 'I'm an artist'. This was significant in how they saw themselves and how they were viewed or judged by others. One child explained how this can be influential:

> 'sometimes your hobbies and talents they define who you are. They let people know what kind of person you are' so let's just say my – my deputy principal (because of my leadership activities) sees me as someone who likes to help people'.

Children spoke about school being a central place where many had the chance to find things they enjoy and are good at. For some children formal education was important as 'it's something I'm good at', while for others it was a negative experience where they felt 'the odd one out' or like they 'don't really belong'. Children suggested there should be more opportunities in schools for children to find their 'strengths'. This could include camps, excursions and cultural programs, tutoring and one on one support. Teachers have a critical role in promoting growth as well as 'being in an environment with support and where people push and encourage you to try new things and do your best'.

Many children said that sporting or creative activities were what made them feel good about themselves, 'I like showing people my art because it makes me feel proud of it and proud of who I am'. Access to extra-curricular activities is an important avenue for finding passions and things that give life meaning and purpose. Having the opportunity to try and master something is important for children, as this can teach them about themselves, bring them into contact with others who have similar interests and be a place they receive affirmation, respect and acknowledgement.

> **'During Parkour we learn how to help people and to get better mindsets and we help each other.'**

Many children spoke about how important it was to have something they loved to do and were good at. They said this gave them one thing to 'fall back on', do when they were feeling lonely or sad, and gave them a reason to persist, ''cause you keep on going if you feel like you're good'.

Developing and achieving feels good and can spur you on to branch out further. One child explained 'it makes you feel better. It makes you feel good. You believe in yourself that you can do all sorts of stuff'. Children gave examples of how proud they felt when they were progressing, reaching a milestone or improving, with one child explaining 'It makes me feel proud when I'm learning and improving' (re football). 'Last year I could barely kick a football, I could only kick a footy 15m and now 50m.'

When you learn to do something well, it can feel good to share talents with others. Mastery can also allow you to help other people and can signal your identity to others, influencing both internal and external perceptions.

> **'I'm very smart with tech and have been from a young age. I rebuild computers. It's important to know that I'm good at it. A lot of the times my friends have issues. Helping people I really enjoy... Overtime, I realised I enjoyed helping people. '**

(g) Contributing to culture

As noted in Section 5.2(i) many young people, especially those from First Nations backgrounds, spoke about cultural connections and activities as critical to their sense of self and permeating all aspects of life, simply that 'culture is who you are'. This was important not only in shaping how they saw themselves but also for the sustainability of their culture, with one child explaining 'We need to keep our culture strong through traditions, dances, knowledge, ceremonies...'. A child from a Culturally and Racially Marginalised (CARM) background outlined how culture is passed on across generations, saying:

> 'culture is something that we grow up with. It's important to have it. If you value your culture, and you show it, like you teach your kids how to do the same thing, and you go to the next generation'.

Connection to culture is not a passive experience but a reciprocal process with many children describing a sense of responsibility 'to keep

culture alive generation to generation'. They talked about the importance of active participation in time with elders, ceremonies, dance, hunting, stories and language:

> 'For me it's just knowing where I came from. And that there are people around me who support me definitely helps. Like what clan I'm from, what language I speak, what my totems are, my family line.'

Children have a right to participate freely in their cultural life. Having access to knowledge and connections is critical, and this comes from family, community, even workers. Some children living away from their family spoke about a lack of connection. Despite the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principles (ATSICPP)[36], which aim to keep children connected to culture, they spoke of few Aboriginal carers in foster or residential care placements who 'know where you come from' and little opportunities to connect to country. One child in residential care commented 'I was supposed to do something with them around my culture, but it never got talked about again, it was forgotten'. They advocated for such opportunities to connect, participate and contribute:

> 'connecting with country, going back to country. Especially if you live in the NT. My country is [name], that's all of my family's land, that is our land, so you know trips out to places like that and day trips to go out for a fish or something like that with family. A supported trip out to country or working with another Aboriginal staff to learn more about your culture'.

(h) Memory building and sharing

Memories have a significant impact on identity. As one child described, 'memory, past experiences and designated history' are critical to how a child views themselves and their life story.

The experiences we have and how we make sense of them determine how we see the world. It is now widely accepted that children benefit from having their life story documented.[37] Record keeping and life story work which supports children to develop coherent narratives can go some way towards addressing the 'not knowing' children in OOHC can experience.[38] One child in care spoke of their fears of forgetting and losing the things that make them who they are:

> 'Memory loss – knowing now that in 50 years' time I might not remember you guys here it scares me more than it should... it hurts more to know now that I might not know later... small things when I lived in (Melbourne) so many memories there and if I forget that I've got nothing, really nothing with my life'.

Some children spoke about the importance of creating positive memories, meaningful experiences they intended to remember, highlighting that 'you can make a thousand memories in one day'. They gave examples of experiences with loved ones, 'fun... different things' such as holidays, trips to 'theme parks' or 'ice-skating' as being important. Some children spoke about these events acting as markers in life which were positive to look back on in photos, 'when I'm looking at photos I just say, "oh I remember that day and I feel happy" – sometimes with my brother and friends and that'.

A few children spoke about the absence of these experiences or positive memories, not having opportunities for holidays, or the absence of loved ones celebrating what is often time spent with family such as Christmas, Father's or Mother's Day. They spoke about this bringing up feelings of loss and disconnection:

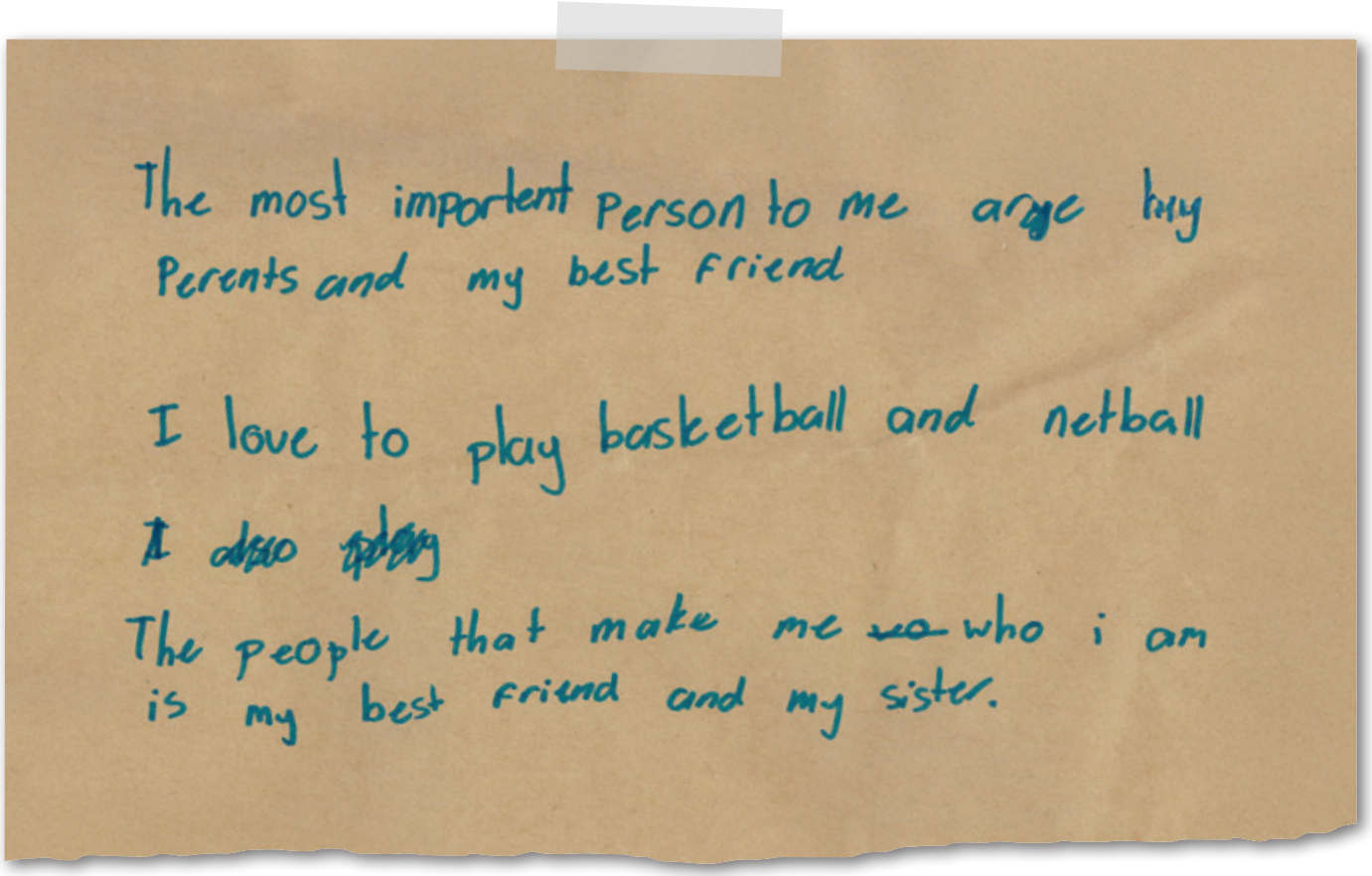
> 'hearing other kids talk about what they did for Christmas – I never had a good Christmas experience so when they asked I would say "oh I just got a present"'.

Children who had experienced multiple changes and moves spoke about the impact of this on their sense of memory and history, 'It's like when you move houses the memories are gone and you have to start new memories'. One child who had moved multiple times spoke of feeling urgency to create memories before she and her best friend were separated saying, 'We just want to … make as many memories as possible, before one of us has to move away'.

Having the opportunity to make good memories, to make sense of difficult memories and to be able to look back and share these is important to children. In addition to photos, children talked about using creative ways to process or record memories, such as art which 'helps you realise about stuff'. These processes also 'might help you not to think about everything else that's happening'. Others spoke of journalling, 'writing about what happened during the day'. Another child spoke about music as a way to connect to memory, especially singing as 'singing can represent lots of things, love, hate and sadness but altogether combined it can make happy memories'.

(i) Affirmation and Flourishing

Growth is encouraged by people who notice and support us. Children spoke about how important it is to have people in your life who pay attention and encourage you to be the best version of yourself. These people build you up and remind you who you are when you are struggling.



Children often spoke about the importance of unconditional positive regard, whether this was from carers, friends or even pets. Someone who is 'always there for you and happy to see you' is critical.' This relationship can make you feel 'more confident to do things' and their 'good energy' is infectious.

Being cared for encourages positive growth. Children spoke about how important it was to be nurtured. They requested 'do things for me sometimes'. One child in care spoke about the importance of being looked after, for some children food was an expression of this care, while for others it was adults noticing when you had done something helpful and praising you. Children said that this attention makes you feel special and valued.

Having people in your life who respect and 'encourage you' can help a child believe in themselves. One child explained 'it's really important to me that I know there is something there that loves me for who I am'. Such validation can 'encourage you to do things you think you can't' and can come from a variety of sources and places.

> **'Over my lifetime so far I've found a lot of people I've connected with they see me as the person my parents never have.'**

Children made it very clear that forming identity is a multifaceted, complex process. Identity is something that children can find, given the right conditions. It relies on relationships and discovering new ways of thinking. Identity is not a goal, but a process, and best summed up by a child:

> 'I think a ground to grow from for me, in a metaphorical way, is a home, somewhere to belong, with people, doesn't have to be blood, but people who support you and are willing to teach you in terms of building relationships and helping you try new things so that you can find your own identity... And not just have a ground, but they water you so you can grow so that you can find your own sense of identity. Cos really, it is up to you.'

6. Acting on the voices of children

Children in OOHC miss out on realising their rights. They are marginalised by their circumstances and as such are entitled to special support to help them claim these rights. Indeed, this entitlement is itself a right that is built into the CRC:

> 'A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State' – Article 20

Supporting these rights is critical to building a 'solid ground' for children to discover and explore their identity. When this ground is in place, children can then realise their other rights. They can start to claim their right to expression, to individuality, to associate with people and institutions of their choice. And with the realisation of their right to a voice, they can continue to claim their rights, develop their sense of self, and contribute to their cultures and communities and world around them.

Children's development of identity and sense of self is a personal manifestation of rights realisation. The National Standards must create an enabling environment for this to happen. Currently, they do not. While the Standards themselves have resonance with some of the issues children raised, the indicators are mostly inconsistent with what the children tell us about identity. The voices of children as presented here provide an opportunity to enrich the National Standards and indicators, so they are fit for purpose today. There are several areas that these voices can help ensure the National Standards head in the right direction.

Almost all children had something to say about who they were and the people, places, institutions, material things and activities that made them who they were. What clearly emerged across consultations was that the different facets of their identity and the way they form their identity and sense of self are indivisible and interdependent. For the children we spoke to, identity was holistic. It encompassed many things including their culture, gender, religion, age, abilities, passions, and all these factors interacted in a complex way. Lots of factors worked together to make them who they were. For example, a child couldn't talk about a sport they played without talking about how they valued their teammates, what they learnt from their coach and how much they admired famous sports stars. When 'identity' is defined only in terms of single concepts, like gender or culture, it fails to embrace all other important facets of identity and how they are connected. While the National Standards include many of the facets children raised, they do not clearly acknowledge the role they all play in identity formation, nor how the Standards interact to support identity formation.

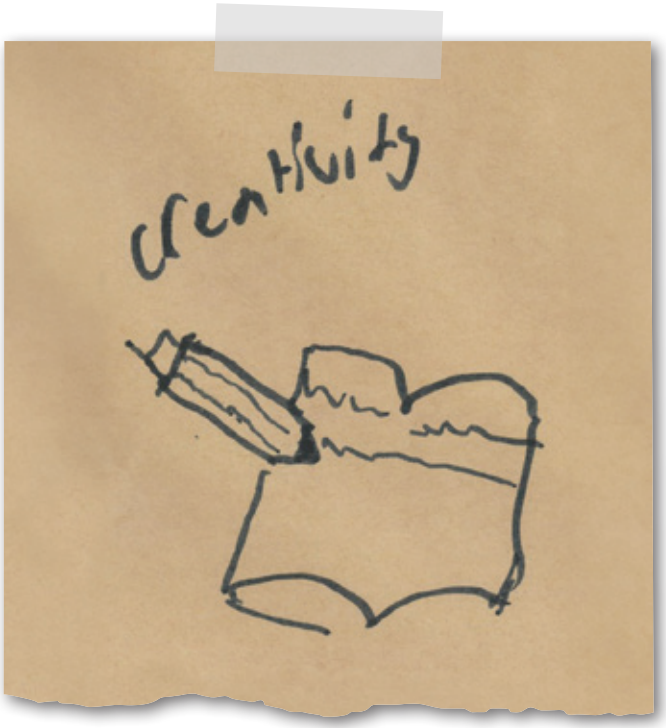
Children have a right to feel a sense of belonging, to feel safe and to be in a stable environment. Standard 1 of the National Standards acknowledges this. Children said that these essential feelings and conditions are rooted in value systems and relationships. Children have some agency in deciding which of these they interact with, but they also have a right to guidance. They have a right to expect that the

people in their lives will fulfil their duty and help them build a foundation in their best interest. While these duty bearers and relationships are alluded to in the National Standards, the active role they must play is not clear.

In addition, the sheer number of times connections and relationships arose in consultations highlighted that identity formation is primarily relational. Where and how these relationships form and connections are made is context-dependent and varies from child to child, but they are central to enabling the formation of a positive sense of self.

Furthermore, when children talked about the relationships in their lives or the relationships they wanted, and when they talked about their value systems and how they wanted to develop them, they did not talk about numbers. They did not discuss the numbers of friends they had or the number of times they saw family in a calendar year or the number of times they attended a place of worship. Quantity did not come up. Children described connection, the depth of relationships and the way people and values made them feel about themselves and the world around them. They described quality. Including qualitative indicators in the National Standards for measuring identity formation would be a fundamental shift of focus to the individual child. This will require careful consideration of how to support children's self-reporting so they can confidently share their views and have them taken seriously. Any redeveloped indicators must be measurable as well as meaningful.

Children expect – and have a right to – support finding and using their voice. The UN Committee on the CRC says that 'States parties have to ensure that the child receives all necessary information and advice'[39] in order to exercise their right to be heard. Standard 2 of the National Standards sets this right of participation out clearly. However, many of the children in OOHC to whom we spoke said that they had never heard about the National Standards. Their capacity to engage in the policies that are supposed to protect them is therefore limited. In addition, while their right to participate is clear in Standard 2, there is only one indicator associated with this Standard, limiting the measurable scope of child participation in the National Standards. Enacting this right in the Standards and indicators must be more intentional if children are going to be heard.



Indeed, across the board, children spoke about needing more agency in the process of identity formation, and in measuring their own development. This means finding ways for children to participate in determining their care arrangements – including having a say in their care plan – and playing an active role in reporting status and progress across all Standards.

While individual participation is addressed in Standard 2, it does not address opportunities for children with lived experience of OOHC to influence decision-making at the policy level. We need to consider the idea that children's voices could radically transform the Standards – and the situation for children in OOHC – for the better.

It is a key role of the NCC to amplify children's voices, especially those of the most silenced and disadvantaged, and shine a light on human rights breaches experienced by some children, such as those in child justice systems[40], many of whom have experienced cross over with OOHC systems[41]. This report provides a starting point by presenting the views of children.

Acting on what children tell us promotes positive identity development and can inform the creation of opportunities for them to develop and thrive. This action is a responsibility for all policy partners. When we genuinely engage with children about issues which impact them, we have an obligation to take those ideas forward, to consider and incorporate them into better policy and practice.

7. Recommendations

International best practice indicates the CRC should guide all policy design and implementation relating to children. For example, in relation to the National Standards, their implementation and measurement must be child-centred and, where appropriate, child-led. This approach also necessitates an accountability framework in which duty bearers are clearly accountable for their roles.

This first recommendation is directed at all five policy areas. Subsequent recommendations are for how the voices of children can be used to improve the National Standards, as this was the focus of consultations. However, the principles underlying all the recommendations are broadly applicable.

1. Agencies responsible for the five Key National Strategies should place child rights at the centre of policy and program design. This includes creating opportunities for children to participate meaningfully and providing feedback to them on how their views have informed policy development.

2. DSS integrate children's perspectives into any policy development and decisions about the National Standards, by:

a. Using this report's findings to inform the refresh process, including defining 'identity' in language that is used by children

b. Engaging children with lived experience of OOHC in the refresh in an advisory capacity, such as a National Standards reference group

c. Reporting back to the National Standards reference group, and to the National Children's Commissioner, on how children's voices have been integrated into the refresh of the National Standards.

3. DSS ensure that the revised National Standards contain meaningful quantitative and qualitative indicators that have:

a. Clear timeframes for implementation and review

b. Defined milestones for action

c. Multiple means of verification, including child self-reporting, for accuracy and consistency of data

d. Accountability measures for all key stakeholders.

4. DSS, in partnership with state and territory counterparts:

a. Develop child-friendly materials – including accessible and online – about the National Standards

b. Train carers, case workers and OOHC providers about the National Standards and how to engage with children about them.

5. DSS, in partnership with state and territory counterparts, engage children in ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the National Standards.

6. All governments provide ongoing opportunities for children to participate meaningfully – to develop their voice and agency – across all the National Standards including:

a. Involving children in the development, design and measurement of their care plans, including cultural plans, in a child-friendly format and in a manner consistent with their evolving capacities

b. Enabling a child's ongoing access to these plans

c. Providing access to an independent advocate to support children in OOHC decision-making processes

d. Developing an indicator assessing children's awareness and knowledge of their rights under the National Standards

e. Ensuring complaints mechanisms enable direct access for children to raise issues or concerns about the National Standards being met.

7. In the refreshed National Standards and indicators, all governments measure connections and relationships that contribute to a positive sense of identity and wellbeing, including:

a. Children's ongoing contact with people with similar experience to them, such as peers, mentors and siblings, and with other family and friends

b. Children's engagement with cultural activities, practices and community

c. Children's participation in play and recreation activities of their choosing, such as team sports and creative pursuits, so they can connect with other children and positive role models

d. Help provided to children to maintain these connections and relationships as they transition between or out of OOHC arrangements.

8. Acknowledging the overrepresentation of First Nations children within the OOHC system, all governments ensure that these recommendations are implemented in a culturally responsive and trauma informed way which respects the lived experience and agency of First Nations children.

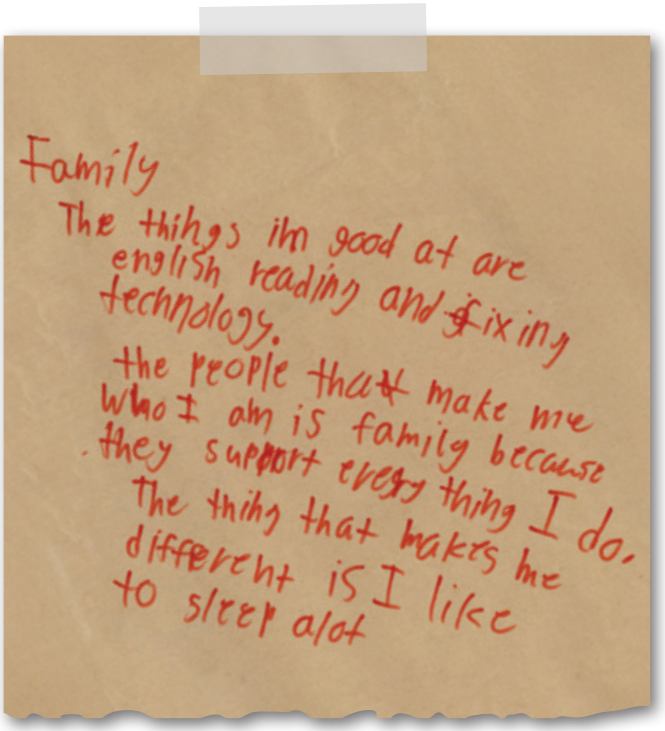
8. Conclusion

> **'Your own self-worth, so just like knowing what you stand for and knowing that you don't have to change for other people, if you're interested in something you can do that thing, like you can always do it.'**

This report is based on the words, voices and experiences of over 500 children across Australia who spoke with us about identity. Many of these children had experiences of disadvantage and vulnerability. Just over a quarter had experienced the OOHC system, whether in foster, residential or other types of care.

By sharing their ideas and insights, children have given us a language that makes these concepts meaningful. These ideas can inform a refresh of the National Standards so that the Standards and indicators better reflect what is important to children and what will best ensure that children in OOHC are able to reach their full potential. Creating mechanisms for children's ongoing participation in both individual and systemic processes is a key step forward.

Listening and acting on the views of children is critical. Doing so increases the likelihood we can provide children with opportunities to fully realise themselves and their rights. All children deserve the opportunity to 'be who they are' and who they are meant to be, regardless of their parental or legal status. In the words of one child living in OOHC, 'you can encourage them to be who they are and get people who help you and then they can be themself when they grow up'.



9. Appendix 1: Demographics

9.1 Number of national consultations and surveys

The Children's Rights Team from the Australian Human Rights Commission, held 96 consultations with 503 children across all Australian jurisdictions between July and November 2024, including metropolitan, regional and remote areas.

Children were recruited through 56 partner organisations. These encompassed generalist settings, such as schools and other educational programs (including specialist and alternative schools), OOHC services, disability services and other child and youth services, including those operating in remote areas, specialist services for LGBTQIA+ young people and youth justice services.

Most consultations were conducted in small groups of up to 10 children. However, some children expressed a desire to share their views individually. For that reason, 24 consultations were conducted as individual interviews. Most consultations and interviews took place in person, except for 6 small group consultations and 6 individual interviews, which were held online.

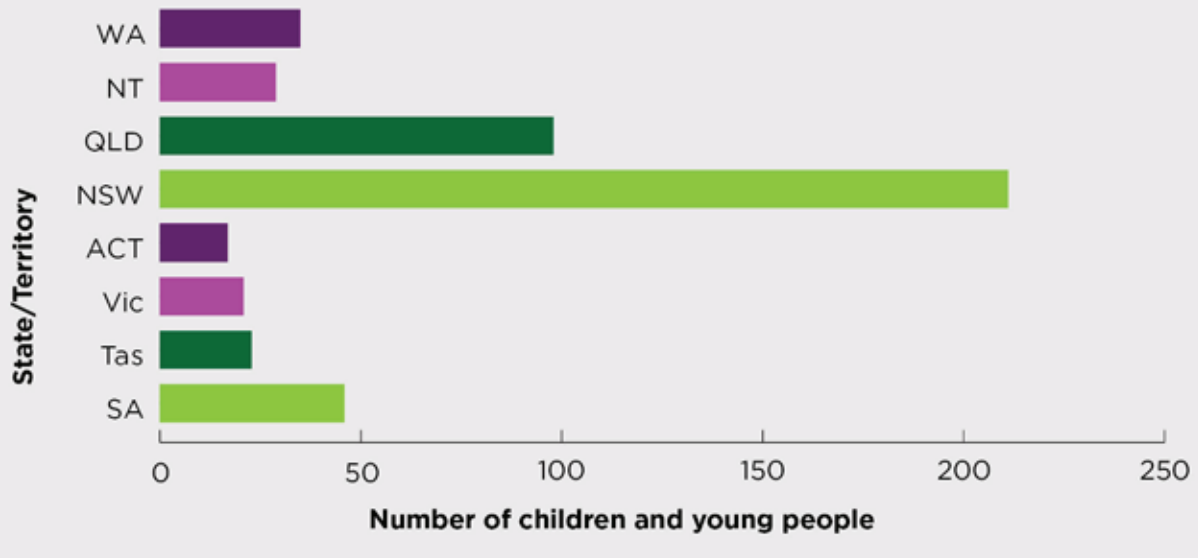
Following the consultations and interviews, children were asked to complete a short survey. Four hundred and ninety-two survey responses were received. Demographic information is known for those children.

9.2 Locations of consultations

Thirty-one consultations were held in New South Wales (Broken Hill, Menindee, Redfern, Stanmore, Albury, Greenwich, Sylvania, Gosford, Parramatta, Bankstown, Woolloomooloo); 18 in the Northern Territory (Winnellie, Katherine); 15 in Queensland (Cairns, Cooktown, Logan); 9 in South Australia (Parkside, Christie Downs, Roxby Downs, Gawler); 8 in Tasmania (Moonah, Hobart City, Berriedale, Launceston); 6 in Victoria (Wodonga, Narre Warren, Point Cook, Bayswater); 5 in Western Australia (Broome); 3 in the Australian Capital Territory (Wanniassa, Molonglo Valley, Gungahlin); and one consultation was conducted online with participants nationwide.

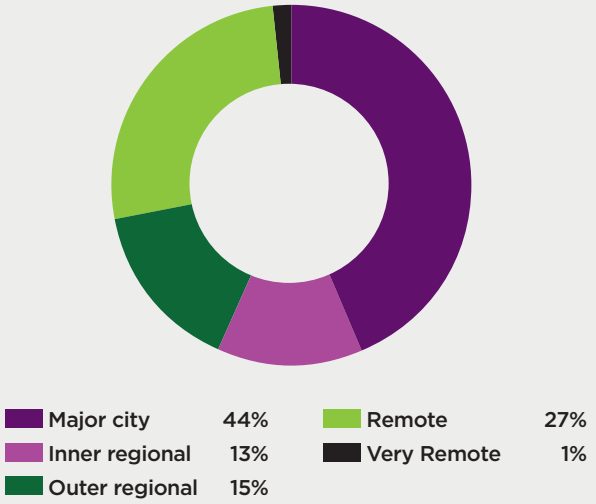
The high number of consultations in New South Wales is attributed to a large-scale consultation event where ten consultations were conducted simultaneously. There was a high number of consultations in Queensland this year because there was opportunity to partner with specialist organisations there, increasing our reach to children in priority groups.

Figure 1: Consultation participation by jurisdiction



Detailed demographic data was only obtained for the children that completed the survey. The figure below shows the usual residence of surveyed children by remoteness classification.[42] This question was answered by 431 children and young people. A high number of children identified as living in remote or very remote areas (28%).

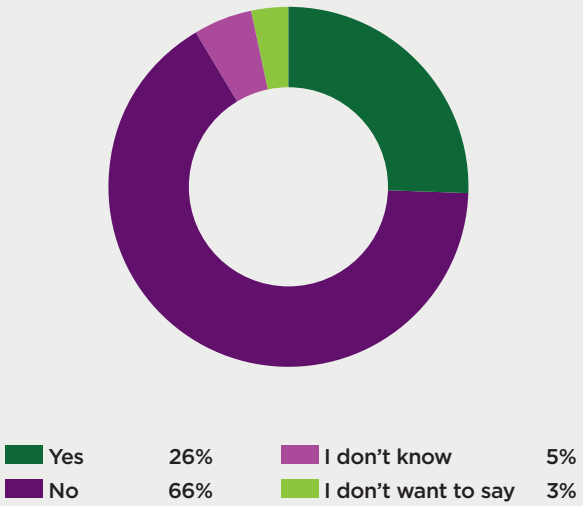
Figure 2: Children and young people by remoteness classification



9.3 Who participated in consultations

Of the 492 participants that completed the survey, 124 (26%) have been in out-of-home care; 66% have not; 5% did not know and 3% did not want to answer.

Figure 3. Have you ever been in out-of-home care (kinship care, foster care, residential care)?

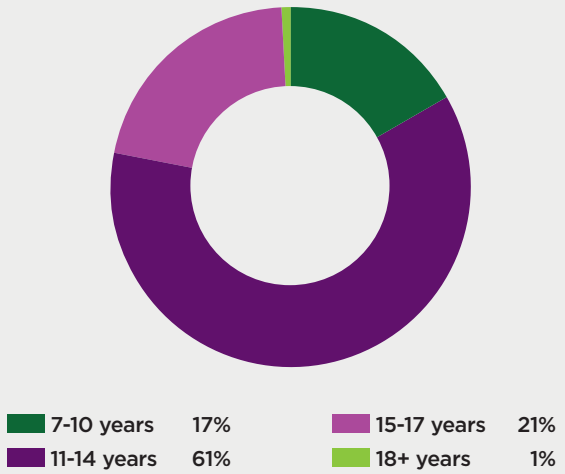


(a) Age

The target age range for consultations was 8-14 years. However, some children who attended on the day of consultations were under 8 years or over 14 years. Age was recorded for 486 children.

Eighty-one survey respondents were aged 7–10 years, 299 were aged 11–14 years, 102 were aged 15–17 years and four were aged 18 years and above.

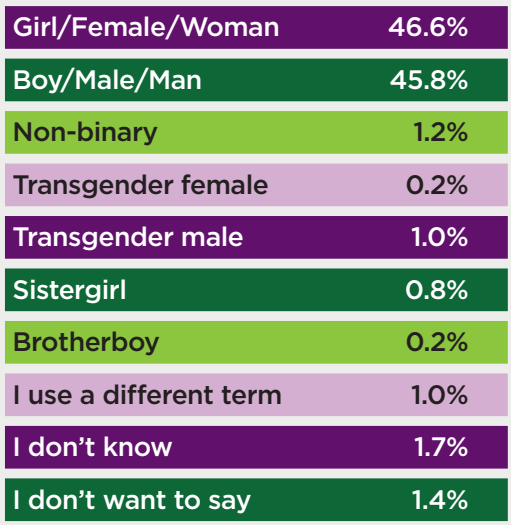
Figure 4: Age breakdown of participants



(b) Gender and sexuality

Gender was recorded for 483 children. When asked to describe their gender, 225 children identified as a girl, female or woman; 221 identified as a boy, male or man; six identified as non-binary; five as transgender male; four as sistergirl; one as brotherboy and one as transgender female.

Figure 5: Gender of participants

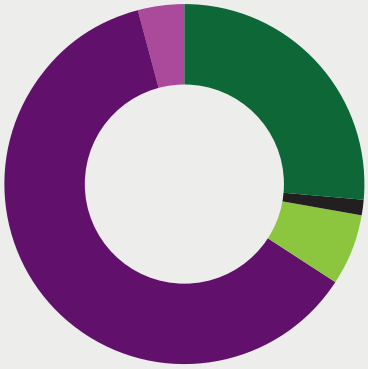


Those that completed the survey for young people aged 14 years and above were also asked to describe their sexuality, and this was recorded for 134 children and young people. More than three-quarters of young people identified as straight. A further 8% identified as bisexual; 4% identified as pansexual; 3% did not want to say; 2% responded that they did not know; 2% identified as lesbian; 2% identified as queer; 1% identified as gay and 2% said they use another term (including asexual or omnisexual).

(c) First Nations children and young people

Out of the 480 children who responded to this question, 34% identified as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or both. Specifically, 128 identified as Aboriginal, 31 identified as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and six identified as Torres Strait Islander. A further 19 did not want to say.

Figure 6: Participants by First Nations status



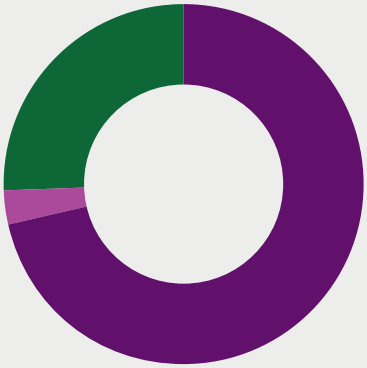
Aboriginal	27%
Torres Strait Islander	1%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	6%
Non-Indigenous	62%
I don't want to say	4%

(d) Cultural background

Of the 492 children that completed the survey, only 344 answered this question. Of these respondents, 197 participants identified as CARM.

Information about languages other than English spoken at home was recorded for 478 children. The majority of participants spoke English only. 3% spoke an Indigenous language and 25% spoke a language other than English or Indigenous language.

Figure 7: Languages spoken at home by participants

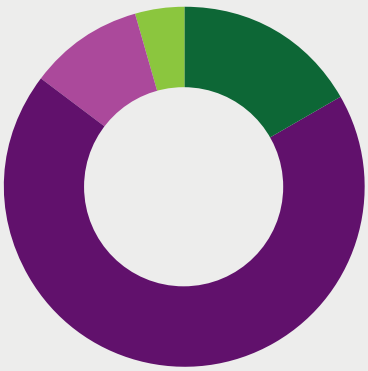


English only	72%
Indigenous language	3%
Languages other than English or Indigenous languages	25%

(e) Children and young people with disability

Eighty children identified that they were living with disability in the survey. Disabilities specified included Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, Anxiety, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Severe Hearing Loss, Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), Depression, Diabetes, Nerve Damage, Hip Dysplasia, Bipolar, Mania, Speech Delay, and Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD). It is to be noted that 10% of respondents indicated that they did not know if they have a disability, and 4% did not want to say.

Figure 8: Percentage of participants with disability



Yes	17%
No	69%
I don't know	10%
I don't want to say	4%

10. Appendix 2: Methodology

A human rights-based approach guided all aspects of this project. The most common description of a human rights-based approach is the PANEL framework:

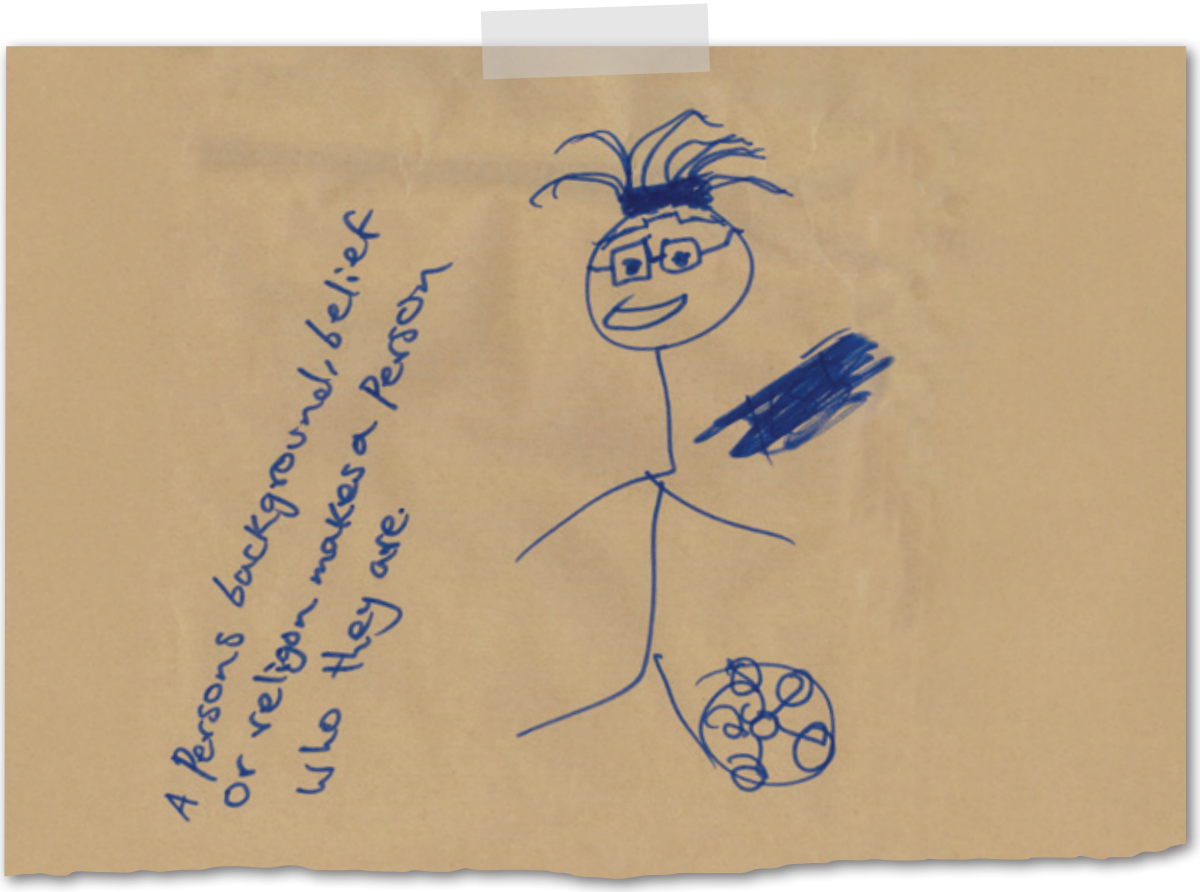
Participation: everyone has the right to participate in decisions which affect their lives. Participation must be active, free, and meaningful, and give attention to issues of accessibility, including access to information in a form and a language that can be understood.

Accountability: accountability requires effective monitoring of compliance with human rights standards and achievement of human rights goals, as well as effective remedies for human rights breaches. For accountability to be effective there must be appropriate laws, policies, institutions, administrative procedures, and mechanisms of redress in order to secure human rights. This also requires the development and use of appropriate human rights indicators.

Non-discrimination and equality: a human rights-based approach means that all forms of discrimination in the realisation of rights must be prohibited, prevented, and eliminated. It also means that priority should be given to people in the most marginalised or vulnerable situations who face the biggest barriers to realising their rights.

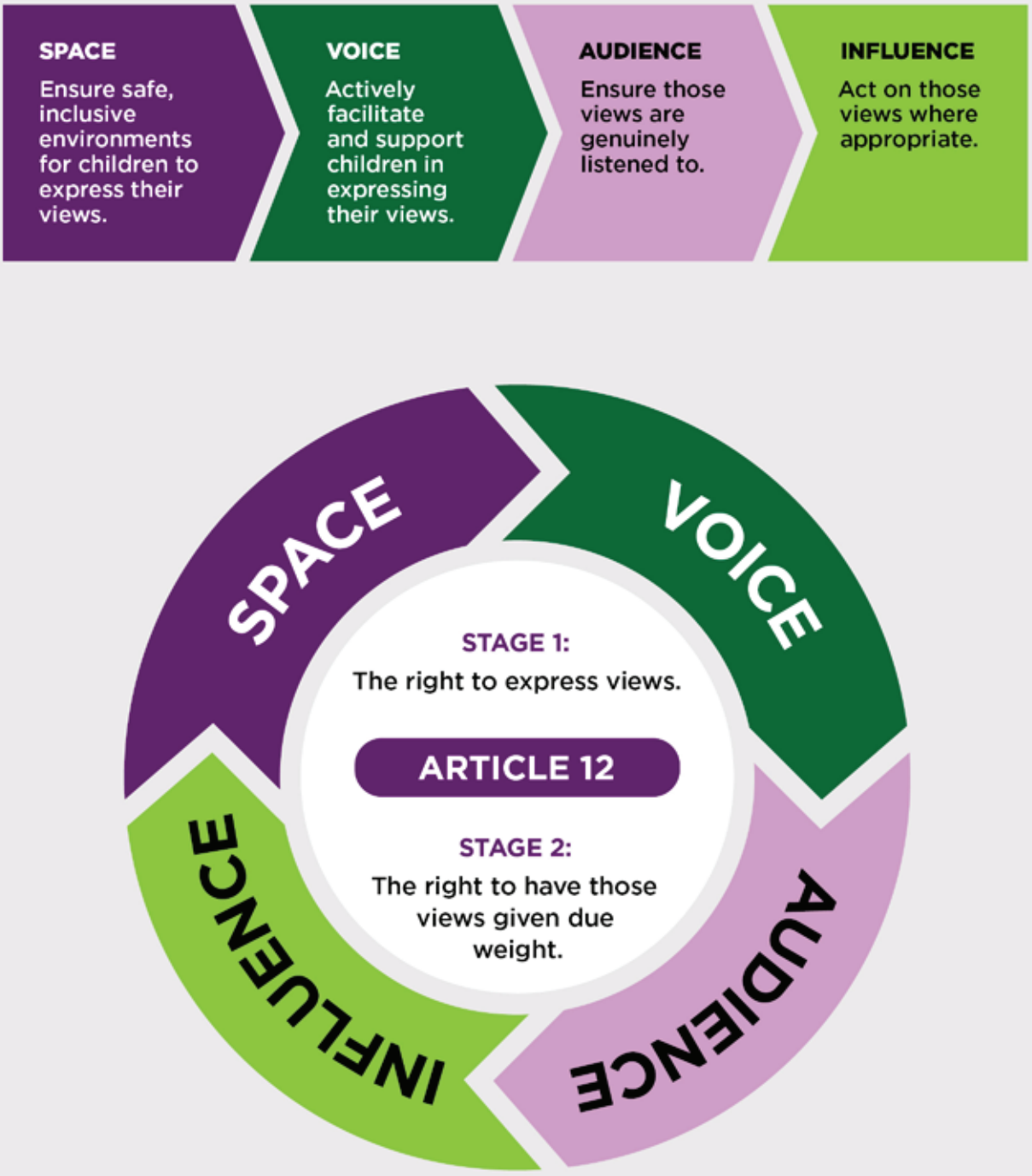
Empowerment: everyone is entitled to claim and exercise their rights and freedoms. Individuals and communities need to be able to understand their rights, and to participate fully in the development of policy and practices which affect their lives.

Legality: a human rights-based approach requires that the law recognises human rights and freedoms as legally enforceable entitlements, and the law itself is consistent with human rights principles.[43]



10.1 Model for children's and young people's participation

Project methodology is guided by the Lundy Model[44] of child participation, which is used in Australia and internationally to engage with children and young people. It includes four stages to facilitate meaningful involvement of children.



Professor Lundy suggests that the following questions are asked at each stage of consultations with children and young people:

1. SPACE

- **Have children's views been sought actively?**
- **Is there a 'safe space' in which children can express themselves freely?**
- **Have steps been taken to ensure that all children affected by the decision can take part?**

How we addressed these questions:

- We actively sought children and young people's views by letting them know they were the experts, we were there to learn from them, and that there were no right or wrong answers.
- We worked with partner organisations to facilitate accessible, friendly and safe environments for children and young people to express their views freely. When children advised they would feel safer speaking to us individually, we moved from a small group session to individual interviews where possible.
- We engaged with children and young people in the target cohort and priority groups identified under the five Key National Strategies. This year, we focused on reaching out to children in a range of OOHC settings, including residential, foster and kinship care.

2. VOICE

- **Do children have the information they need in an appropriate format to enable them to form a view?**
- **Have children been given a range of options as to how they might choose to express their opinion**?

How we addressed these questions:

- We provided children, young people and their parents/carers, and partner organisations with written information about the project prior to each consultation; we discussed the project and the issues to be addressed at the start of each consultation and told children and young people that their participation was voluntary.
- Children and young people were offered a variety of ways to express their views, including individual and group activities, and an anonymous survey. They were able to convey their views in writing, drawing or discussion, engaging in group discussion or individual interviews.

3. AUDIENCE

- **Who is the 'audience' for children's perspectives?**
- **Is there a process for communicating children's views?**
- **Does that person/body have the power to make decisions?**

How we addressed these questions:

- We, the NCC and her team, are the initial audience in the room, hearing the children's views directly. The Government Departments, as the policy makers responsible for the five Key National Strategies, are the primary audience for children and young people's perspectives. These are DSS, AGD and NIAA.
- Children and young people's views were communicated to the Departments in the form of this report and a presentation to the project Steering Committee. A child-friendly version will also be made to communicate the report in a more accessible format.
- The focus of Year 2 consultations was on *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*. DSS has primary responsibility for the implementation of the action plan and intends to use this report to inform the refresh of the National Standards and its indicators.

4. INFLUENCE

- **Were the children's views considered by those with the power to effect change?**
- **What process is in place to ensure that children's views inform decisions that affect children?**
- **Have children been informed of the ways in which their opinion may impact decisions?**
- **Have the children been provided with feedback explaining the reasons for decisions taken?**

How we addressed these questions:

- We told children that we would present their views to those who could influence the implementation of the Key National Strategies. This was achieved by providing this report to the Australian Government through DSS.
- We invited representatives from DSS to observe a consultation so that children had the opportunity to present their views and ideas directly to the agency that will be making decisions that affect them.
- We provide feedback to children and young people on what we have heard from them. In Year 1, we developed a brief animated film, which we sent to participants and made available for public consumption.
- We seek updates from the Government Departments responsible for Key National Strategies on the impact children's views have had on policy development. We aim to include this alongside the Final Report on our website.

10.2 Engaging children in the consultations

Each Key National Strategy identifies priority groups, and some have priority groups in common. Further, the priority groups are not mutually exclusive, with organisations often providing services to children across the priority groups. Given this, we aimed to talk to a diverse range of children, adopting a proportional approach to age, gender and disadvantage. This included children with disability, First Nations children, and children with lived experience of OOHC.

Contact with children in the target groups occurred through partner organisations, who were already providing services to them. Partner organisations were sent written information about the purpose of the consultations and guidelines for identifying suitable children to take part.[45] This included a series of questions for partner organisations to consider when balancing children and young people's right to participate with their right to protection.

10.3 How the consultations were safe for children

The critical ethical consideration in working with children is how to balance the welfare rights of children to be protected from any possible exploitation, trauma and harm with their right to be consulted and heard about matters that affect them.[46]

The Commission's Child Safety and Wellbeing Policy guides all its activities involving children, young people, and families. It is available at: https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/commission-general/child-safety-and-wellbeing-policy-2020.

It is based on the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations, developed by the former NCC, and endorsed by all states and territories.

The Commission's Child Safety and Wellbeing Policy covers core processes and procedures, including seeking consent, involving families and communities, respecting equity and diversity, ensuring staff are suitable and supported, child-focused complaints systems, disclosure and reporting, staff training, and ensuring safe physical and online environments. All staff working on this project had NSW Working with Children Checks.

Given that many children participating in consultations were those with lived experience of vulnerability and disadvantage, consultations occurred in the presence of a trusted adult (teacher, youth worker, counsellor, case worker). This involved the person(s) being present during the consultation or the person(s) co-facilitating the consultation. Consulting in this way also allowed for support, if necessary, to be available after the consultation.

Empowering children in the consultation context is key to minimising their vulnerability and promoting their safe participation. We sought to achieve this by giving children choice in how they participated, providing multiple opportunities for them to express any concerns, and enabling them to cease their participation if they chose.[47] A variety of additional measures were incorporated to minimise the risk or alleviate the effects of participant distress. This included developing distress and disclosure protocols,[48] and working with partner organisations to create safe spaces in terms of room layout and interpersonal dynamics. All children were given a list of services at the conclusion of the consultation as well as contact details for the project director, should they have any questions or concerns arising from their participation.

Consistent with the Commission's Child Safety and Wellbeing Policy, the Child Safety Risk Assessment tool was applied to this project. This tool was developed by the Commission for organisations to comply with the National Child Safe Principles.

Culturally safe and trauma-informed principles and practices are particularly important when consulting with First Nations children. Research undertaken by Doel-Mackaway with Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory found that Aboriginal children wanted their parents and Elders in their community to be approached before seeking to engage directly with them.[49]

These children and young people spoke about protocols to follow where governments wish to talk with Aboriginal children. These included written contact with parents, to an Elder in the community or to the school, indicating they want to talk with Aboriginal children and young people.[50]

This project sought to follow these protocols, in the way it worked through partner organisations already working with and supporting children. We also made prior contact with other community stakeholders where advised.

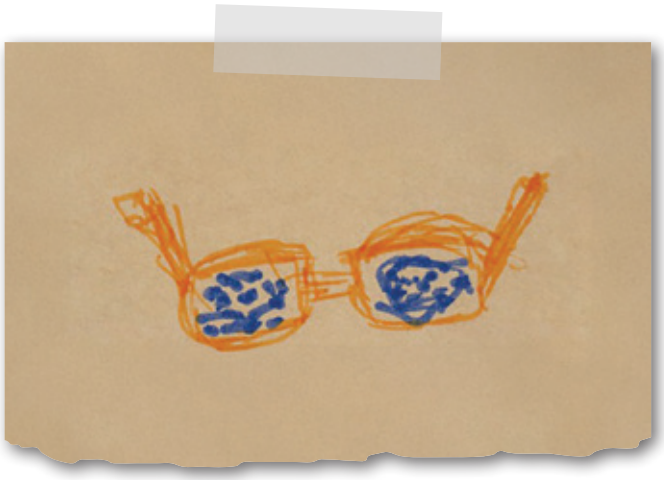
Additional considerations to address cultural safety included testing and piloting consultation materials with First Nations children, and inviting First Nations partner organisations to co-facilitate consultations.

10.4 Seeking appropriate permission and consent

Organisations were given information about the project, which also involved discussion of their capacity to provide support, if needed, to children during and after the consultation. Discussions were held seeking their views on the best way to engage with the children they work with, and sharing advice based on our experiences with consultations to date.

Three versions of information sheets and consent forms were developed. A young person version, an easy read version, and one for parents, carers or guardians. All children provided written consent to take part in the consultations and parent, carer or guardian consent was additionally obtained for children aged younger than 15 years.

We obtained verbal consent from children at the beginning of each of the consultations. We reiterated that their participation was voluntary, that how much they participated was entirely up to them and that they could withdraw their participation at any time without consequence.



10.5 Consultations

Like 2023, consultations were conducted with children through small group activity-based discussions and individual interviews. This was supplemented by a survey open only to children who participated in the consultation process. The use of multiple methods, as opposed to discussion only, is a strength of participatory approaches as it considers the different communication preferences and needs of children.[51] Activity-based methods were also employed in light of a review of adolescents' experiences of participating in sensitive research which showed that young people would like their participation to be fun, creative and enjoyable.[52] This year, we increasingly endeavoured to provide options for those children whose stated preference was for privacy and confidentiality. This included online and individual interviews to allow for higher levels of privacy than group settings afford, in line with research guidelines that highlight the importance of privacy and confidentiality considerations when topics are potentially stigmatising.[53]

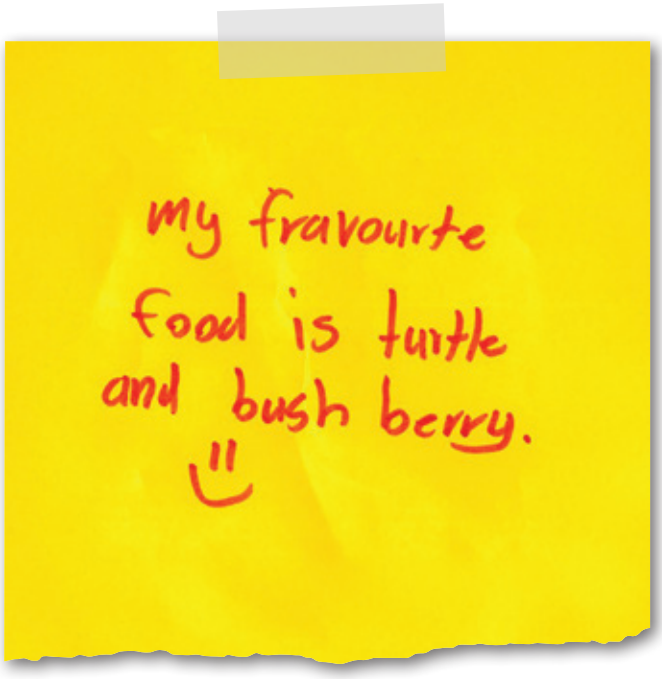
The approach to the consultations was tested with two groups of young people as part of the development process: one with the ACYP's NSW Youth Advisory Council, and the other with the Safe and Supported Youth Advisory Group. These groups included individuals with a diverse range of experiences including First Nations, disability and OOHC. This process was instrumental in producing both culturally appropriate and child-friendly materials.

The resulting questions and activities were piloted with three additional groups of children prior to full roll-out of the consultation process. Two of these pilots tested the face-to-face methodology, including one with a First Nations group, and the third tested the online consultation format developed this year.

(a) Content of the consultations

Consultations revolved around a group-based activity designed to answer broad questions about children's understanding of identity. These focused on:

- What identity means to children
- The things that make children feel good about themselves
- The relationships that are most meaningful and supportive for children



- How positive relationships for children can be better supported.

The activity involved presenting children with a blank expanse of brown paper, folded to resemble a brick wall. Children were asked to write or draw about the things that were important to their identity on the bricks. Prompt questions scaffolded the activity and subsequent discussion, including:

What are the things that are most important to who you are?

- What are you really good at and love to do?
- What are the things that make you special or different from others?
- Who are the people that make you who you are?

Children were challenged to cover the graffiti wall with their ideas about identity and what was important to their developing sense of self. Children were given different options to participate, from creating their own individual 'bricks' on separate sheets of paper that were then stuck together to make a wall, through to collaboratively creating a group wall.

Group discussion focused on what is important to a child's developing sense of identity. This included ideas about positive experiences that children found supportive of their development of sense of self, and negative experiences that helped children define what they did not want to be. Questioning led the discussion onto the relationships that children identified as important

to their identity, and who might miss out on these supportive relationships.

The activity concluded with a discussion about how government could better support positive relationships for those children who might otherwise miss out.

Initially, a second activity involving moving around the room was included in the consultation to explore the formats that children would prefer for building positive relationships, such as online, peer connections and role models. As consultations progressed, this activity was largely omitted from the consultations as much of the content was covered spontaneously in the earlier discussions, and time for a second activity was often limited.

This year, a significant number of children indicated they would prefer to have individual interviews rather than participate in a group discussion. This activity was adapted to facilitate individual interviews – both in person and online – where possible. Individual discussions followed the same content as the group discussions.

(b) Survey

Two surveys were developed to appropriately collect information from children aged 8–12 years and children aged 13–17 years. Specific demographic information was only obtained through the survey.

Surveys were distributed to children who participated in the consultation and were available online and in paper form. They were anonymous.

Survey questions were developed to consolidate information provided during the consultations, including providing a ranking for the importance of the many aspects of identity discussed. It was also a further opportunity for children to comment on issues and share information that they were not comfortable discussing in front of others.

(c) Acknowledgement of participation

All children in the consultations received a certificate of appreciation for their participation. Children who attended consultations received a gift voucher in recognition of their contribution. The exception to this was the mega consultation, as detailed below, where children received a fidget toy as part of a larger thank you pack provided by the council.

(d) Providing feedback to children

Following each group consultation, children received a written summary of what they had shared with us during the session. This aimed to show children that they had been heard and understand how their views had been represented. This also sought to show children how their views would be presented to policy makers, alongside the views of their peers.

(e) Innovations in 2024

In this second year of the project, some continuous improvements evolved based on children's feedback, such as adapting the model by offering individual interviews where children indicated they would be more comfortable discussing this topic in a more confidential setting.

Several other innovations were embedded in the methodology to further expand the evidence base about the variety of practices in consulting with children.

Accessibility improvements

We completed disability inclusion and Easy Read training before commencing consultation planning this year. This assisted us to create consultation materials and approaches that were more accessible for a broader range of children and their parents. The Easy Read information and consent forms were provided to all partner organisations for distribution to prospective participants. They were also used in some consultations – group and one-to-one – to help discuss consent at the beginning of consultations.

Youth reference group

The Youth Consult for Change (known as UC Change), convened by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), was engaged as a youth reference group for the 2024 report. The UC Change group consists of approximately ten young people (aged 16-22 years) with diverse backgrounds and all with experience of OOHC.

We met with the UC Change group three times across the development of the 2024 report. At the first meeting, we provided an introduction to the project and workshopped the consultation questions with the group so they could develop an understanding of the consultation content and process. In the second meeting, we discussed the themes emerging from consultation data. We sought their suggestions as to how to structure the information and 'interpret to provide

nuance'.[54] At the final meeting, we shared an overview of the draft 2024 report and sought their feedback on how to shape the recommendations to best represent the views of children. We also discussed options for child-friendly ways of sharing our findings.

This process brought the voice of lived experience more directly into the writing of the report. It helped to ensure that final report was deeply connected with and accurately reflected the intent of what children had told us in consultations.

Co-facilitation

In 2024, two organisations were recruited to support a co-facilitated approach to consultations. One was the CREATE Foundation (NSW), who specialise in working with children with an OOHC experience. The second was Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS), an advocacy organisation working with disabled young people in Victoria.

Both organisations were engaged to recruit a young person co-facilitator for a consultation session with the priority cohort relevant to their expertise. The young person was remunerated for their time in line with the policy of the supporting organisation.

In the leadup to each consultation, we provided the co-facilitators with the consultation materials, including the consultation runsheet. We conducted an online briefing discussion with the relevant organisation contact and the co-facilitator to discuss our approach to consultations and answer any questions. We met prior to each consultation commencing to allow further time to prepare, and convened a debrief discussion following each consultation. During the consultation, the young co-facilitator led the discussion with children with the support of a SQE team member and notetaker.

Online consultations

An online option was developed using MS Teams for the discussion and a Miro Board for the graffiti wall. This was successfully piloted with the eSafety Youth Council.

Online consultation was offered as an option to all organisations that were approached to support a consultation, and in situations where changes to travel arrangements meant consultations could no longer proceed on a face-to-face basis. While several individual interviews were conducted online, there was limited uptake of the online consultation option for a group of children.

Mega Event

While we conducted most consultations in small group or individual settings, we held one 'mega event' in collaboration with Canterbury-Bankstown Council. This involved convening a group of 77 children across ten consultation tables.

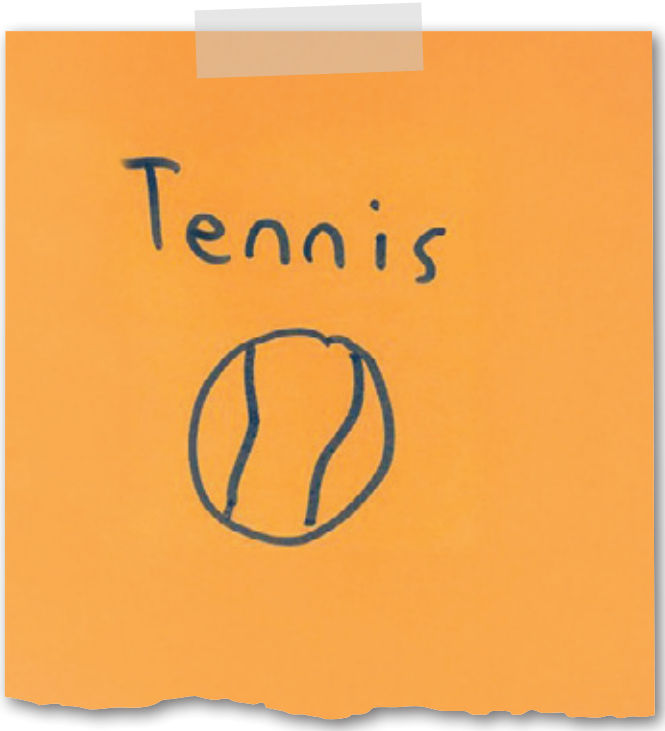
As with other consultations, the consultation plan informed the content of this session, however we modified the process slightly to accommodate the larger group. For example, as the children came from multiple schools across the region, children were placed at tables with other children from their school for the smaller group consultation activities. The children completed written activities on individual pieces of paper, which we then consolidated into one giant graffiti wall. At the end of the session, one child from each table was invited to feed back on the discussion at their table to the larger group.

10.6 Analysis of the content of the consultations and surveys

The content from the Graffiti Wall activity, the notes taken in the consultations, the surveys and the audio tapes of the consultations (where consent to record was provided) were content analysed to identify themes in the data. All information was then coded under these themes and when possible, by specific priority groups. As noted above these emerging themes were presented to the youth reference group for further discussion and workshopping, which informed the structure of the children's narrative section of the report.

10.7 Reflections on practice

The purpose of these consultations was to hear from children about the issues that are important to them, to inform the five Key National Strategies. It was not designed to be representative of the population of Australian children. Given the qualitative nature of the consultation, generalisation to a wider population is not possible. However, these consultations provide important insights and an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the priority groups.



(a) Challenges and limitations

Small group format:

Children were recruited through partner organisations that were already providing services to them. Partner organisations this year ranged from mainstream schools, where we were able to hear from a broad range of children who did not necessarily have knowledge and experience of OOHC, through to specialist services who engage with children who have lived experience including homelessness, disability, child protection, and OOHC.

When we spoke with children in mainstream settings, we were mindful of privacy concerns and were led by the children, not explicitly mentioning the topic of OOHC unless it was raised in the group discussion. We found that many children were not comfortable discussing experiences of OOHC in group settings, even those recruited through specialist OOHC services, so many of the discussions in these settings were conducted as individual interviews or in small groups of children with existing relationships. Where group discussions did take place, it was important to

allow time and space for children to settle, engage and build rapport, not only with us but also with one another.

In the anonymous survey conducted after the consultations, children told us that creating an 'inclusive' environment for consultation, which fostered 'trust', connection and collaboration was important. Many children gave positive feedback about participating in activities and several children commented that discussion with peers was the best part of their participation. They valued the opportunity to hear from other children and share their experiences. Other children gave feedback that they felt 'shy' or 'awkward' talking about their experiences. Some children indicated that a one-on-one meeting would have been preferable to a group, and a face-to-face session would have worked better than an online meeting. This speaks to the need for a variety of methods of engagement.

With respect to age, we designed the consultation materials for 8–14-year-olds, although on consultation days, children up to 17 years of age turned up to take part. We chose to listen to all children who wished to participate, although holding consultations with children with a wide range of ages/developmental stages can be problematic as there are varying levels of understanding within the group. Where it was possible to do so, we divided the group based on age/developmental stage, to enable discussion to take place in developmentally appropriate ways.

Reach:

We found it challenging to reach some demographics of children and young people.

While a significant number of First Nations children took part in consultations, few of these were facilitated in partnership with ACCO's. While attempts were made to partner with ACCO's only a small number of organisations hosted us for a direct consultation with children. These worked best when time was invested in the relationship, and they came from a warm referral.

We were able to reach a wider range of children with disability in 2024. The team undertook disability inclusion training facilitated by Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS) and sought to build understanding and relationships with new partner organisations with specialist knowledge.

Great effort was made to reach children and young people in remote areas. There were transport difficulties in some locations and in one instance, consultations needed to be conducted online. This reinforces the need for appropriate time to allow for contingency plans.

Time:

The topic of identity is not a concrete concept, and it often took some initial discussion to unpack the topic before we could proceed with the planned activities. This raised some interesting ideas, and we adapted more broad questions into the beginning of the consultations to scaffold the discussions. In addition, and as outlined above, children were often reluctant to share their experiences of vulnerability in group settings, so we frequently offered to shift to smaller groups of children who knew each other or individual interviews to ensure they felt comfortable participating. As noted above, allowing time to build rapport and create safety was important so that children felt more comfortable. This was especially important for children with care experiences and those from First Nations backgrounds.

Time was also a key issue in the introduction of new modalities. While we initially explored offering an option for audio recordings (whereby children had the option of submitting a short 3-5minute recording of their views) this was not implemented in 2024 due to difficulties in overcoming concerns with safeguarding and online platform options within the consultation timeframe.

Online option:

To facilitate participation of a broader range of children, particularly those with disability, we developed an online methodology. Research with children with disability in Victoria recommended that resources, information, services and supports should always be available both online and in person to ensure the access needs of all people were met.[55]

We framed online consultations around the same discussion questions and included using a Miro board to create the graffiti wall. There was limited take up of this format, with a clear preference for group consultations to be conducted face-to-face and individual interviews online.

(b) Opportunities

Cofacilitation:

Using cofacilitators with relevant lived experience worked positively in creating safe environments for children to participate. Allowing for greater preparation time and workshopping with co-facilitators would have improved the model, especially in terms of adjusting materials and consultation design appropriate for the audience.

Mega consultation:

Children were focused and energetic, and the event was a useful way of gathering a substantial amount of input from a large number of children. The mega event required an extensive amount of logistical planning and human resources on the day. We would not have been able to convene this on our own - the event was only possible with the work of the team from Canterbury-Bankstown Council and the support of colleagues from other teams within the Australian Human Rights Commission.

(c) What children thought about the consultations

An anonymous survey was conducted with children and young people after the consultation session to ask them for their thoughts about the ways that we conducted the consultations.

We asked children and young people to write down what they thought was the best part of the consultation. As noted in Section 1.3, overwhelmingly children commented that having a voice and being heard was the best part of the consultations, 'I had a golden opportunity to express my voice'.

We also asked children and young people what they thought the worst part of the session was and how sessions could be improved. The majority of children reported that 'nothing' was negative about the session and had no suggested improvement, commenting that the session was 'fun', 'it wasn't stressful and took a convenient amount of time'.

For children who did suggest improvement, the group dynamic or format of the session were common issues raised. Some children indicated that a one-on-one meeting would have been preferable to a group, and a face-to-face session would have worked better than an online meeting. Other children commented that they felt 'awkward' talking about the topic, especially within a group setting.

All the feedback from children and young people will be used to inform consultations in the coming years, and to build an evidence base which identifies ways to embed the views of children, young people, and their families in the future development of policy and services.

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