



## Evidence Review of Permanency Practices

Summary of issues and practices

### Background

Systematic reforms in the NSW child protection system emphasise tailored supports for vulnerable children and families. The goal is to provide children with a safe, loving and stable home through family preservation and restoration where possible, and guardianship or open adoption for children unable to return home.

In 2019, the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) engaged the Parenting Research Centre (PRC) and the Research Centre for Children and Families (Research Centre) to review, design, implement, trial and evaluate of a practice framework for the NSW Permanency Support Program. The aim is to support caseworkers and families with evidence of good practices for sustaining a permanent home for children through restoration, guardianship or open adoption.

The Research Centre undertook a detailed evidence review, to draw out the approaches to permanency based on the best available evidence. A search was conducted of published and grey literature of caseworker practices that help parents and carers develop the skills and confidence to support permanency for children and young people through restoration, guardianship or adoption.

The Parenting Research Centre (PRC) is now using the findings from the evidence review to inform the work that has commenced with two out-of-home care non-government agency partners to develop the new casework practice framework for permanency practices. Practitioners from CareSouth will focus on practices to support restoration for children in out-of-home care, while The Benevolent Society team will focus on guardianship and adoption. Both sites will involve the Permanency Coordinators from the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ).

The Research Centre will conduct a process and implementation evaluation of the project. The overarching research question for the evaluation is: *How does adherence to the permanency practice framework change practice?* The evaluation is due to commence in early 2021 and the interim findings from the pilot study should be available by late 2022.

### Practice review

The evidence review examined practices that build the capacity of the adults who care for children in order to promote children's development, wellbeing and safety.

The search strategy located references that had a central focus on practices (at the parent/carer-caseworker level) to build the capacity of parents and carers to promote the safety, stability and security of a child in restoration, guardianship or open adoption.

A total of 4,184 initial references were located and screened. Titles and Abstracts were reviewed for relevance, and full-texts were further assessed for eligibility. A total of 46 articles were included in the evidence review.

Key program and practice information was extracted from each reference. The evidence review revealed a range of permanency programs and practices with varying levels of evidence.

For the full report, go to the [Evidence Review of Permanency Practices](#)

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## What is the common element approach?

The common elements approach essentially asks, 'what are the specific techniques or strategies that make up an intervention?' and 'what elements are shared across similar interventions?'.<sup>1</sup>

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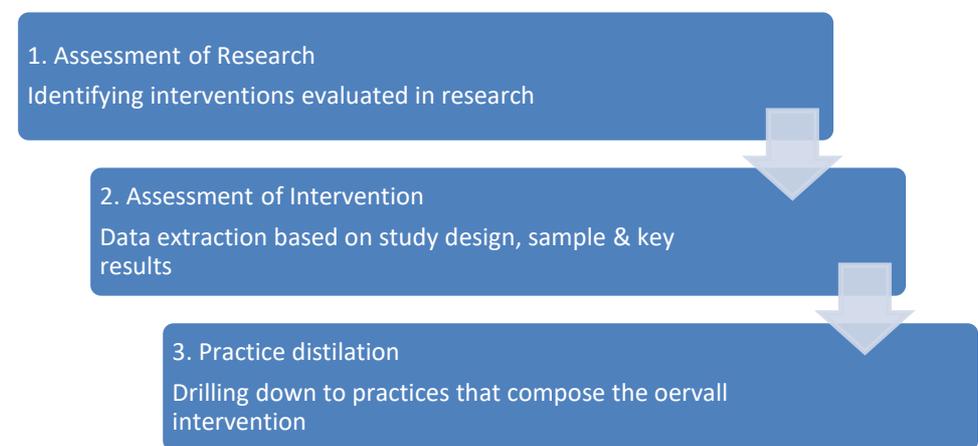
## Expanding on targeted outcomes of practices to build parenting ability:

- **Skills and knowledge** – developing understanding of child development and discrete, practical parenting techniques
- **Capacity** – building parent or carer readiness or motivation to change parenting practices
- **Confidence** – parent or carer competence and self-efficacy in parenting
- **Responsiveness** – to alter parent or carer responses to children's (problem) behaviours; increasing warmth and sensitivity; reducing hostility
- **Insight and self-awareness** – improving parent or carer ability to reflect on how their own behaviours can affect their interactions with children
- **Address parental trauma** – to confront or address maladaptive interaction styles that are often a result of parents' early childhood environments

## COMMON ELEMENTS APPROACH TO PRACTICE

Delivery of manualised interventions is often conflated with the delivery of evidence-based practice and most evidence-based interventions are evaluated at the program level rather than at the practice level, which create challenges in identifying the 'most effective' practices. To address these challenges, the common elements approach served as a method for understanding the evidence base for interventions.

At the first stage, each reference was evaluated based on its study aims, sample, methodology, and key findings. At this level, assessment of the rigour of the research was made by identifying the study design (i.e., experimental, quasi-experimental, pre- and post-test, and descriptive). At the second stage, evaluations of existing interventions at the program level were identified. At the third state, key practice strategies or techniques within each intervention were identified where possible, as well as intended practice outcomes, strengths and limitations. While this information was not always readily available, this **common elements** approach allowed us to highlight individual practices that occur across different interventions that effectively promote permanency outcomes for children.



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## The intended outcomes of permanency programs and practices

Mapping of the intended outcomes of programs/practices was undertaken through inductive coding of the intended goals or outcomes described for each program/practice. These categories were also further refined through discussions between collaborators at PRC and the Research Centre.

**Building parenting ability** – Approaches related to building the parenting skills of parents and carers (sub-categories within this outcome are expanded in the left-hand column).

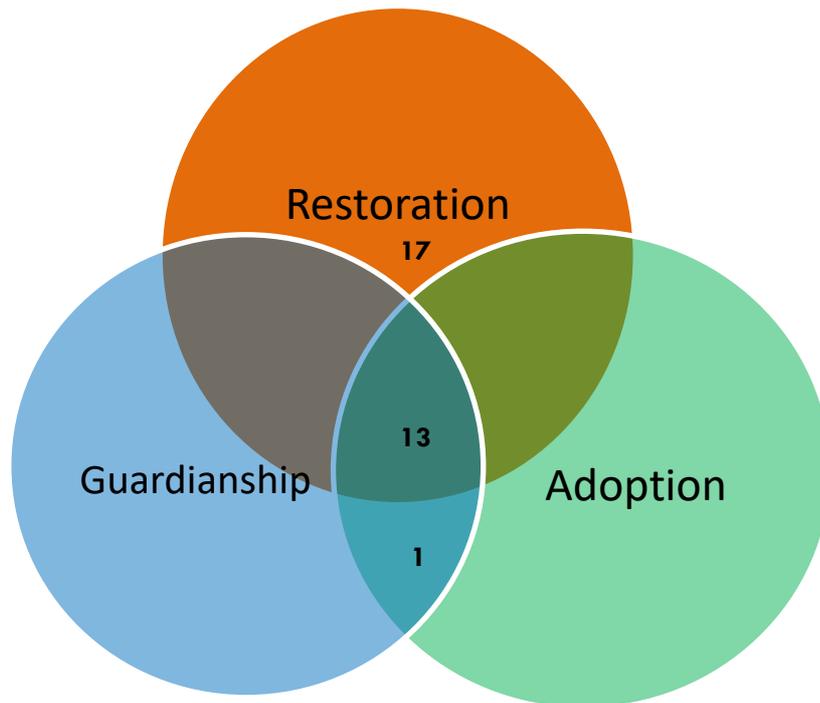
**Collaborative planning approaches** – with parents and/or carers that involves them in decision making and supporting intentions to achieve specific permanency goals for the child.

**Parent engagement and navigation** – with parents and/or carers that engage them in permanency planning, allow them to develop awareness of issues that may have caused child protection involvement and provide clarity about how to address case plan goal for restoration, guardianship or adoption.

**Strengthening parent and carer relationships** – to improve communication and interactions between parents and carers.

**Strengthening parent/carers and child relationships** – to improve communication and interactions between parents/carers and the children.

Figure 1: Overlap of practices identified in the review based on restoration, guardianship or adoption.



## Assessment of evidence

Practices were identified within programs and an assessment was made on the level of evidence based on the study design in which the program was evaluated: experimental, quasi-experimental, pre-test/post-test, or descriptive. Practices considered to be high evidence (i.e., within programs that have been evaluated in an experimental design) are shown in **bold**; and practices that appeared frequently in the evidence review and are within programs that have been evaluated in a quasi-experimental design are shown in underline.

### Restoration only:

- Collaborative helping map
- Didactic lesson
- Empowerment plans
- **Feedback**
- In-home services
- Joining
- **Modelling**
- **Motivational interviewing**
- Partner parenting
- Re-enactment
- Restructuring
- **Skill building**
- Task analysis
- Therapeutic contact
- Universal design
- Videotaped vignettes

### Guardianship, Restoration, and Adoption:

- **Behaviour management training**
- **Client homework**
- Direct instruction
- Experiential exercises
- **Goal setting and feedback**
- Guided imagery
- Icebreaker meeting
- **In the moment comments**
- **Parent Daily Report**
- Parent-child interaction activity
- **Roleplaying**
- **Video feedback**
- Visit coaching

### Guardianship and Adoption:

- Mindful emotion coaching

## PRACTICES MAPPED TO OUTCOMES

The full evidence review and list of practices is available in the [Evidence Review of Permanency Practices](#), available on the Research Centre for Children and Families website. The table below provides examples of the practice with the most available evidence of efficacy.

Note: practices marked with an \* indicate that further information about outcomes is limited in the full-text articles identified for this review.

| Practice                              | Description   | Intended goal / outcome  |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Behaviour management training*</b> | <p>Using a behavioural approach, may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasising that parents providing children with support for positive or prosocial behaviour using concrete reinforcement strategies to help reverse negative patterns of interactions that children have been accustomed to</li> <li>• Assisting parents/carers with identifying origins of problems, responding to parenting challenges, and child's receptivity to praise or rewards</li> <li>• Viewing the parents' capacity for self-regulation as central</li> </ul> | <p>Parents and carers are better able to anticipate events and thereby increase their ability to manage the child's behaviour.</p>   |
| <b>Client homework</b>                | <p>Home practice assignments: complete homework assignments or tasks at home relating to the parenting skills taught through the program, which are often reviewed at the next session by the practitioner.</p>   | <p>Strengthening family members' skills in communication, problem solving, and parenting; help parents implement behaviour management methods discussed and practiced in the groups to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach families the skills they need to prevent placement or successfully reunify with their children</li> <li>• Help parents' practice and think about the concepts learned in class</li> <li>• Expand on practice times that occur with the clinician present</li> </ul> |
| <b>Feedback</b>                       | <p>Using behavioural education principles. Practitioners provide problem solving for parents around managing children's problem behaviours. May involve practitioners observing a parent-child interaction and then providing feedback to reinforce positive changes in parenting.</p>  | <p>Parents and carers have a chance to present particular situations that were either particularly challenging or positive for them. Problem solving with other foster carers around problem behaviours.</p>   |

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <p><b>Goal setting and feedback</b></p> | <p>With practitioners, participants identify the kinds of information or topics they would like to discuss and set small parenting goals around; progress is later shared, and the practitioner offers support, skill building and reinforcement.</p>   | <p>Empower parents; provide an opportunity for sharing, communication and fun. Instead of continued discussions of failure, success is demonstrated as family members bridge gaps and alter emotional patterns of interaction through enjoyable experiences.</p> <p>Parents can report successes relating to tasks they set at the end of the training of the previous week and ask for support from the group if problems arise.</p> <p>Enable parent to provide a safe, permanent environment that ensures the well-being of the child</p> |
| <p><b>In the moment comments</b></p>    | <p>Most crucial aspect of the intervention is the parent coach's use of "In the Moment" comments that target the caregiver behaviours of nurturance, following the lead with delight, and non-frightening behaviours. These are used throughout the home visiting session while working with the parent.</p>  | <p>Caregiver is helped to override tendencies to respond, "in kind" and to provide nurturance regardless; caregiver is helped to provide environment that helps child develop regulatory capabilities and to decrease behaviours that may be frightening or overwhelming to the child.</p>   |
| <p><b>Modelling</b></p>                 | <p>Using behavioural education principles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Modelling positive behaviours (e.g., during interactive activities and while sharing a group meal)</li> <li>• Allows parents to see good parenting and try it with their own children, under the supervision of the staff, before they begin practising at home during the transition to restoration</li> </ul> | <p>Continuity of relationships, empower parents to change, providing opportunities to practice newly acquired skills, and providing frequent opportunities for participant self-evaluation.</p> <p>Gives parents a learning experience they often missed out on in their own childhood</p>   |
| <p><b>Motivational interviewing</b></p> | <p>Counselling approach that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires a caseworker to listen empathetically and build trust with the family before pushing for change.</li> <li>• Getting parents to recognize the potential benefits of participating in a home-based family support program.</li> </ul>   | <p>Encourage motivation to change and resolve ambivalence; increase motivation and intent to change; engage and motivate families.</p>   |

## Parent Daily Report

During the week the facilitator will check in with the parents or carers by phone and parents complete a "Parent Daily Report" (PDR): The PDR is a 31-item measure of behaviour problems (e.g., arguing, complaining, back-talk).

Caregivers were asked to recall the past 24-h and respond yes or no to whether the identified foster or kinship child displayed the behaviour; which of the behaviours that occurred were stressful for them to deal with.

Opportunity to report back on how the skills are working at home and engage in individual problem solving that:

- Trouble shoot problems the foster parent was having in implementing the assignment, and to collect data on the child's problem behaviours during the past day.
- Allows program staff and foster parents to identify specific problems that are most commonly occurring and also which of those behaviours are most stressful so program staff can follow up with more intensive contact in order to support the family; critical for ongoing case planning.

## Parent-child interaction activity

Interactive play between parents and children with developmental guidance from a therapist or workers; children and parents receive support before, during and after visits in an effort to maximize their intended effectiveness; involves child-parent interactions and child's free play with developmentally appropriate toys selected to elicit trauma play and foster social interaction.

Planned activities are determined prior to the visit to assist both the parent and child with internalizing new skills and more positive interaction patterns.

Can occur during support group through or during visitation.

Can involve interactions that are observed by a therapist behind a 1-way mirror, communicates with parent via wireless device, parent applies skills related to following the child's lead.

Strengthen parent-child bond; home visits can be used to reinforce newly learned skills in the family's natural environment and to gather additional information for ongoing problem resolution strategies to:

- Help improve the parent/child bonds
- Develop play and trauma narratives, to help children express strong feelings and for parents to gain insight of the impact of their past attachment history on their parenting.
- Help parents learn to interact with and respond to children's behaviour appropriately; teach and reinforce positive communication, discipline, boundary setting and shared learning to strengthen the family.

## Roleplaying

using behavioural education principles and active learning methods; illustrations of primary concepts are presented via role-plays.

Predictive process to explore family life cycle stages; may involve designing and role-playing family system responses to the predictable and other unforeseen events. They are coached as a family system to use strengths and skills they have integrated into their family functioning in order to generalize responses that work well for them.

Parents have the opportunity to practice skills in a supported environment that:

- Provides the family an opportunity to predict the difficult-to-handle events that, based on the events of the past, will probably occur in the future.
- Help prospective foster parents assess their own strengths and limits in working with children and parents who need foster care services

## Skill building\*

Teach parents and children a wide variety of "life skills".

## Therapeutic contact

Visitation occurs in a home-like setting on location, or in community or home settings; participant families consist of children and their parent or parents, and in some cases extended family members.

Supervised visitation with therapist present, coaching and mentoring services, the visits foster a natural environment where children and their families are therapeutically assessed, coached, and mentored.

Visits are family-centred and strength-based, focusing on the needs of the child and family; gives parents hands-on experience and immediate feedback as they master parenting skills.

Weekly meetings can be arranged between foster parents and birthparents to create a visiting schedule and to share information about the child, discuss discipline strategies, and communicate about parenting styles.

Experience visits that promote growth, positive development, developmental milestones, and support safety, permanency, and well-being.

Promote nurturing and positive parenting skill development.

Families engage in healthy play activities and communication necessary for successful reunification.

Maintain the parent-child relationship and to strengthen family attachments; enhance the parent's ability to adequately and appropriately care for and relate to his or her child; identify and resolve problems before the child is returned to the parent's care; develop and practice new parenting behaviours and patterns of interaction."

## Video feedback

Active learning methods; illustrations of primary concepts are presented via role-plays and videotapes. Videotapes are made of all sessions; and a worker corrects deviations from model fidelity via weekly supervisory calls.

Uses videotaped examples of parents and children interacting in order to demonstrate parenting skills. Then parents are given opportunities to discuss and practice the skills.

Can be used in conjunction with attachment theory-informed, strength-based consultation strategies

Parents have the opportunity to practice skills in a supported environment; bolster parents' feelings of confidence and competence; increasing parenting sensitivity

## The need for evidence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

In NSW, and other Australian child protection systems, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are disproportionately represented in care. While they only represent approximately 5% of the population, Indigenous children are more than 10 times more likely to be in care than non-Indigenous Australians. The causes for this over-representation and the increasing rates of Indigenous children in care are multiple and complex. They are, however, largely recognised as a combination of factors including the intergenerational effects of forced removal of children, poor socio-economic status, and cultural differences in child-rearing practices.<sup>2</sup>

These factors are further exacerbated by a lack of culturally appropriate early intervention and support services, with many services being triggered by involvement with child protection services, rather than before problems reach this crisis point.<sup>3</sup> There are also issues with the different cultural concepts of 'family' with the Aboriginal view of child rearing being the responsibility of the extended family and community being at odds with the European concept of nuclear family structures.<sup>4</sup> The evidence review noted the lack of research on programs that reflected the cultural practices and Kinship connections relevant for Indigenous communities and families in Australia.

It is widely acknowledged that we need to keep the special needs of Indigenous children in mind in terms of how we keep them connected to their families and their culture, so that they and their culture can thrive. The Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (Absec) review of Aboriginal parenting programs emphasised the importance of Aboriginal community control and ownership of services and programs. Skilled Aboriginal practitioners, offering locally tailored approaches, embedded in cultural practice is critical in building trust and engagement with Aboriginal families. Aboriginal community control, ownership and oversight of Aboriginal programs and Aboriginal participation in the design, development of Aboriginal service delivery is an essential element of ongoing continuous improvement efforts. The cultural endorsement and support of communities enabled practitioners to challenge parents and families to change their approach to parenting their children.<sup>5</sup> The importance of children retaining cultural identity and connection has been well illustrated through the tragic impacts of past policies that involved the severing of those connections.

## Conclusions

This evidence review provided a broad view of permanency practices across restoration, guardianship and adoption. As can be seen in Figure 1, there are key practice elements that are common to all, while most are specific to restoration. The common elements approach provides a clearer picture of the components of evidence-based interventions and can be useful for informing practice, developing frameworks, and identifying whether these elements are utilised in existing interventions.

From an extensive canvassing of the existing published and grey literature, the bulk of research on programs and practices that promote permanency outcomes is conducted in the US, which can limit its applicability to the Australian context. In addition, there is very limited research about practices to support permanency outcomes for children and families within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse populations. The need to build a local evidence base for supporting permanency for children, parents and carers in Australia is critical.

The results of this finding also suggest that there needs to be an embedding of practices in training and teaching. For instance, there could be a competency approach to social work training in which common elements can serve as the basis. In collaboration with PRC, the findings of the evidence review strengthen the development of an evidence-based practice framework that integrates delivery of targeted support aimed at family restoration and other permanency planning options, with clear processes and strategies to guide its implementation within organisations.

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Evidence and Implementation (n.d.) Using a "common elements approach" in Victorian human services.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2014). Child Protection Australia 2012–13 Child Welfare Series. ACT: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Education and Child Development. (2014). The removal of many Aboriginal children. Adelaide: Department of Education and Child Development.

<sup>4</sup> Seymour, J. (2016) Children, Parents and the Courts. Legal intervention in family life. Federation Press, Sydney.

<sup>5</sup> Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec) (2017) Aboriginal Parenting Programs: Review of Case Studies.

### For more information

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