



creating a better life
for children and young
people in care

Summary Report on QFCC Roundtable

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About CREATE Foundation

The CREATE Foundation is the national consumer peak body for children and young people with an out-of-home care experience. We represent the voices of over 45,000 children and young people currently in care, and those who have transitioned from care, up to the age of 25. Our vision is that all children and young people with a care experience reach their full potential. Our mission is to create a better life for children and young people in care.

To do this we:

CONNECT children and young people to each other, CREATE and their community to **EMPOWER** children and young people to build self-confidence, self-esteem, and skills that enable them to have a voice and be heard to

CHANGE the systems impacting children and young people, in consultation with them, through advocacy to improve policies, practices and services and increase community awareness.

We achieve our mission by facilitating a variety of programs and services for children and young people with a statutory care experience and developing policy and research to advocate for a better care system.

Introduction

On 4 December 2024, CREATE Foundation facilitated Roundtable on behalf of the Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) with young people between 8-12 years old who have an experience of residential care on how their residential care placements could feel more like 'home.' This report provides a summary of the insights gathered from young people and key learnings and themes from the Roundtable. It aims to shed light on the experiences and needs of young people who have a strong connection to their community, particularly those who are from discrete communities in Far North Queensland. The report covers various aspects of 'home' including design features that support young people to feel safe and secure, the importance of relationships and connection, the desire for cultural activities and connection, and prioritising activities and hobbies.

Roundtable context

Demographics of young people

In total, 20 young people attended the roundtable, with 16 participating in activities. All young people identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Of the young people:

- 11 were aged between 8-12 years old and living in residential care currently;
- 2 were younger than 8 years old with the youngest being 3.5 years old;
- 3 were older than 12 with the eldest being 15 years old; and
- 4 young people were outside of the age bracket and not interested in participating, however were required to attend due to their home environment and staffing ratios.



Activity and Roundtable design

In designing the Roundtable, consideration of the age group and interests of young people shaped the activities and discussion. The following activities were developed to engage young people and elicit responses in relation to their feelings of home within residential care:

- **Statement sorting game:** Young people were given six statements and asked to rank these in relation to whether they wanted to see changes in this area of their life or not. Statements related to whether young people feel as though they had a say in what happens in their home, whether they get to see family enough, whether their carers know them and whether they like their rooms. Young people shared their perspectives on these topics with CREATE staff.
- **Design my dream home:** Young people were given various craft items and asked to design their own dream home that felt like home and made them feel the most comfortable. They were asked what furniture they would like in a home, how they would want their home to feel, the routines, traditions and celebrations that would be important to them and what would make it feel like home.
- **Making 'home soup':** Young people did an activity with objects representing different 'ingredients,' including the routines, feelings, activities, furniture and fun things which would shape their idea of 'home' and what they would mix together and in what quantities to make a 'home soup'.

CREATE Foundation co-facilitated the event alongside Aunty Tammy Solomon from Mullah Mara Together who supported young people in talking about cultural heritage and cultural activities, and integrated this into their activities throughout the afternoon.

Key findings

Balance in home design and feelings of home

Young people often report that the design of residential care homes can feel clinical, bare or that it does not help them feel welcomed or safe. This theme was consistent with what young people at the Roundtable reported. They spoke of their living environments and wanting these to be places that promoted comfort, belonging and emotional wellbeing. One young person stated:

"No pretty things can be in resis because they're ugly. But they should have pretty things."

One sibling group spoke about the time they entered care and how the home design was not well-equipped for them to live in the home, which made them feel uneasy and unwelcomed:


"When we moved into the resi, they weren't expecting us and so they put us in a random room which was like a lounge room and later had to add a door to the room. I'm so glad we have a door now."

Mostly, though, young people shared that the residential care providers are trying to make their rooms their safe place and encourage young people to have a say in their living situation:

"I like having my own room."

"I like the colours of my bed."

"I like that no one is allowed in my room except with me."



Young people also spoke about how routines can contribute to the feelings of home and safety in the space. One such example was in relation to how other young people in the residential home can be both a positive and negative:

“There needs to be enough kids for fun, but not too many.”

“I don’t want my home to be too busy or have too many kids.”

Young people consistently talked about the importance of feeling loved and how this assists them in feeling happy and supported:

“If I had a dream house it would be full of love.”

“There is lots of love and happiness in my home soup, because they go together.”

“There always needs to be love in cooking and at home because it tastes better [in relation to home soup].”

One young person talked about not liking their current living situation and said the following:

“If I was making soup for my home now, I would want lots of ‘angry.’”

Several young people also spoke about things they wouldn’t allow in their dream house including fighting, mean comments and conflict. One young person stated:

“There would be no swearing in my dream home.”

This section highlights the perspectives of young people on what contributes to a safe, supportive, and enjoyable living environment in residential care. Young people valued routines and a balance of social interactions within the home, preferring spaces that are not too busy but allow for fun and connection. Love and emotional support were central to their vision of an ideal home, with many associating happiness and care with family-like warmth. Conversely, they shared the negative impact of conflict and expressed a desire to avoid fighting, swearing, and mean behaviour in their dream living spaces. This emphasises the need for nurturing, harmonious, and inclusive environments in residential care.

Young people's involvement


Underpinning comments from young people throughout all activities on the day was an emphasis on the importance of involvement of young people in decision making and sharing information with them about their life. For example, young people spoke about how they enjoy having a say in what their room looks like:

“I get to look after my room.”

“I get to choose what’s in my room.”

In relation to activities, young people reported that carers check in with them about what they might want to do. However, they also talked about some activities not being tailored to them (See section: Activities, routines and hobbies):

“They ask us if we want to go somewhere or do something.”



Young people generally also spoke about not feeling heard or listened to by carers or child protection staff in their life:

“We know not to rely on some of the workers ‘cause they don’t listen.”

“No one listens to me.”

“I do not have a say in anything that happens to me.”

This was noted across topics such as seeking connection with family, house design and routine design, and how young people feel connected. It is evident that young people value being involved in decision making and having a say in their living arrangements. Involving young people in decision making not only empowers them, but also ensures that their needs and preferences are taken into consideration. It promotes a sense of ownership and responsibility, as they feel invested in their living space when given the opportunity to contribute to its design and activities.

Importance of relationships and connection

Relationships with carers

Young people spoke about their experiences with carers in residential care. There were mixed feelings from young people about carers with varied reports. Some young people spoke positively about relationships with carers:

“My carers know me enough. They take us places and look after us.”

“They’re [carers] lovely and nice and spend time with me.”

Some young people shared that they do not feel as though carers know them, or attempt to know them:

“My carers are always kind and encouraging but they don’t listen.”

“I don’t know if my carers know me and I don’t know if they want to get to know me.”

“My carers don’t know anything about me.”

“Some of my carers know about my culture, but they don’t ask and don’t know.”

“There is some favouritism to other kids.”


“They’re annoying and talk too much.”

“The carers could know me better.”

Young people also shared characteristics they would like to see in carers:

“I like when my carer cooks me dinner and I like when my carer is kind and a good listener.”

“I like when my carers are fun and kind.”



Building meaningful connections between young people and carers is crucial for creating a nurturing and supportive environment. Young people also emphasise the importance of kindness, attentiveness, and shared activities in their relationships with carers. Fostering positive connections requires carers to not only be present but to actively listen, engage, and show genuine interest in the lives and cultures of the young people in their care. When this is done well, young people report feeling heard and though their carers understand them.

Connection with family

Young people felt very connected to their families, with many young people in this age group in residential care only recently entering the care system. Young people shared that they often want more contact and connection with family than what is currently established:

“It could be better. We don’t see them much.”

“Seeing my family is okay but I only get to see them for two hours and I want to see them more.”

“I only get to see my mum but not the rest of my family.”

“I like seeing my mum and they should take me to see mum more. They do it a bit, but I want it to happen more.”

Overall, young people did talk positively about time spent with family and for some young people, family contact was scheduled and regular:

“I like having fun with family every week.”

One young person also acknowledged that they felt involved in the process of when and how often they got to see family, which was a positive for them:

“I like that I get to choose when to see them.”

Young people also spoke about what they wished would be different or what they would change about their situation if they could:

“I would have all of my family and friends in my dream house.”

“I wish I got to celebrate things with my family.”

Another young person spoke about their experience being separated from family after being moved from a discrete community and wanting reunification with family to be prioritised:

“They should hurry up and send me back to family. I don’t know why I’m still here.”

The desire to connect with and feel embedded in a family unit was a common theme, highlighting the importance of familial bonds. Some participants expressed their wish for more time spent with family, wanting longer visits and more opportunities to celebrate together. These sentiments underscore the profound impact that connection with family has on their wellbeing.



Cultural activities and connection

All young people who attended the Roundtable identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and some also identified additional cultural backgrounds. All young people consistently spoke about the importance of cultural heritage, community and cultural activities and a desire for this to be integrated and prioritised in their residential care homes. Specifically, young people spoke about the things they miss from home, often referring to communities close to Cairns:

“I miss food from home like dugong and turtle.”

“I miss [traditional] activities from home.”

“I miss speaking creole.”

“I miss old people storytelling and teaching.”

Young people also spoke about wanting to explore and connect to their cultural identity whether that is Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or another cultural identity:

“I miss my Country. I want to return to Country.”

“I’ve been here [Cairns] since 2021. I don’t want to go back to just visit, I want to stay there [referencing discrete community].”

“If I could live anywhere I would go to New Zealand. I’m Maori too and I want to be back there.”

Young people also spoke about wanting to have more engagement in activities like they would do at home in community or with family, related to their cultural identity:

“I want to go bushwalking.”

“Bonfire and cooking on the coal.”

“Diving for crays.”

“I like hunting things like fishing in saltwater areas.”

Some young people spoke about the different cultural expectations of First Nations Australians and western expectations of housing and rooming:

“My room is boring. I want to share with my siblings.”

“I don’t like my bed. I prefer a mattress on the ground.”

Overall, all young people agreed when one young person suggested:

“[I want to be] Learning culture more.”

Young people at the Roundtable raised this challenge as a particular priority and felt that cultural identity and connection was one of the most important aspects to be addressed in residential care currently. Young people expressed a strong desire to return to Country and engage in activities that reflect their cultural heritage.



Activities, routines and hobbies

Young people spoke about activities, routines and hobbies that promote their feelings of safety, comfort and homeliness in residential care homes. Young people mostly spoke about food, activities and routines that help them to feel comfortable in their home.

In relation to food available in their homes, some young people spoke about being able to be involved in the cooking and shopping:

“I like that I get to help the carers cook and go shop.”

“All the food is good. I like getting to help cook.”

“I want to go shopping by myself to get what I like.”

Some young people spoke about the food not being things that they like and wanting more vegetables:

“It’s not healthy enough. We need more lettuce and like veggies.”

“I want more carrots.”

“Eat more veggies.”

“I would like to eat more vegetables.”

Young people also spoke about activities that they would like to have happen in a residential home:

“I want to have puzzles, laptops, games, bikes, TV. I like lots of windows and a couch for two people so I can hang out. I like a bath.”

“I would have a swing and a pool.”

“I like swimming in the creek.”

“I want only sports and no arts. I don’t like arts much.”

“[I like my carers] When they can play basketball.”

One young person stated that they did not feel as though they did many activities in the residential home, which was reinforced by other young people, stating:

“We never do nothing in the resi.”

However, young people also recognised that sometimes having too many activities or commitments can be overwhelming and create anxiety:

“I don’t want too much things or else it will be too busy.”

“My home now has not enough sleep.”

Subsequently, young people want choice and control about their activities, food and routines but also share that carer investment and involvement is important for them feeling committed to this process. While many expressed their enthusiasm for engaging in diverse activities such as puzzles, laptops, games, and sports, some emphasised the importance of maintaining a balanced schedule to prevent overwhelm and anxiety. It is essential to consider both the physical and recreational needs of these young people, ensuring a well-rounded environment that promotes their overall wellbeing.



Recommendations

Young people openly shared about their challenges, things they liked about residential care and things they would like to see different. The following recommendations have been synthesised from on what young people have said. These focus on development of cultural and individualised plans, empowerment and involvement of young people in their home environments.

Empower young people's active participation, seek opportunities for young people to provide regular feedback, and codesign living spaces with young people who live there.

Involving young people in active participation and feedback opportunities will assist them in feeling that their voice has been heard. This not only empowers them but also encourages a sense of ownership and responsibility towards their living environment. Young people consistently shared that this assists them to feel safe and comfortable in their living spaces and for them to express their thoughts, ideas, and concerns openly. Young people also consistently shared that they don't feel listened to. In this context, consideration of how young people can regularly provide feedback could be explored.

Involving young people in the design of their living spaces can have a significant impact on their overall wellbeing. By actively engaging them in decision-making, we can ensure that their voices are heard, and their preferences are considered. This collaborative approach allows for a sense of ownership and empowerment, fostering a positive and inclusive environment that reflects young people's unique needs and preferences. Young people consistently spoke about wanting particular items, traditions and feelings in their home. By codesigning living spaces with young people, providers can create a sense of belonging and agency, ultimately contributing to their overall satisfaction and wellbeing.

Adopt an individualised approach to supporting younger people in residential care including through cultural support planning and cultural celebration.

Recognising a young person's unique backgrounds, experiences, and needs allows us to create tailored support plans that prioritise their well-being and development. By understanding and respecting their cultural identities, we can foster a sense of belonging and integration within the care environment. This is achieved by providing opportunities for cultural engagement and creating individualised cultural plans that honour their heritage and traditions. Young people consistently spoke about things that they wanted in their home and how that was different to other young people. Further, many young people held contrasting views on particular elements of residential home design. As a result, young people need an individualised approach to their home environment.

By embracing and celebrating their unique cultural backgrounds, a sense of belonging and promotion of their overall wellbeing can be fostered. All young people spoke about their cultural background, things they loved from culture that important to them in a home environment, and things they miss from where they are from. The emphasis from young people was clear – that cultural identity and continued access to cultural traditions and activities are paramount. Given differences in cultural backgrounds based on different communities of origin, an individualised approach is required.



Support residential care homes to develop strong routines that allow for flexibility.

Creating a nurturing and inclusive environment for young individuals requires striking a balance between structure and flexibility. In providing a structured framework while accommodating individual preferences and cultural practices, service providers can empower young people to have a voice in their care. Young people spoke about wanting to have activities and opportunities built into their home environment, but for these to not be too cumbersome or demanding. As such, it is important for residential homes to have clear structures, routines and plans for participation that can be flexibly adapted to young people's needs.

Conclusion

Younger people in residential care have unique and specialised needs. The complex balance between maintaining childhood traditions and experiences and meeting requirements of a residential care provider are particularly important for this cohort. Interestingly, young people at the Roundtable shared that what is most important to them is involvement in things that affect them, connection with family, and carers and routines that support their individual needs, including cultural needs. What underpins all comments made by young people was a desire to feel culturally connected and participate in cultural traditions within their home.

For further information, please contact the Advocacy Team at the CREATE Foundation at advocacy@create.org.au