



# Rights, Voices, Stories project report:

*Identifying what matters to children  
and young people involved with  
the Queensland child  
protection system*

HOME



## Acknowledgements

The Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians across the lands, seas and skies where we walk, live and work.

We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as two unique peoples, with their own rich and distinct cultures, strengths and knowledge. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures across Queensland and pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

## The Queensland Family and Child Commission

The QFCC is a statutory authority of the Queensland Government. Established in 2014, it oversees the child protection and family support system. Through awareness, advocacy and accountability, the QFCC seeks to give practical effect to the rights of all children and young people in Queensland.

## Accessibility

The Queensland Government is committed to providing accessible services to Queenslanders from all culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. If you have difficulty understanding this report, you can contact Translating and Interpreting Service National on 13 14 50 to arrange for an interpreter to effectively explain it to you. Local call charges apply if calling within Australia; higher rates apply from mobile phones and payphones.

## Contact for enquiries

Queensland Family and Child Commission  
Level 8, 63 George Street  
PO Box 15217, Brisbane City East QLD 4002

Email: [info@qfcc.qld.gov.au](mailto:info@qfcc.qld.gov.au)  
[www.qfcc.qld.gov.au](http://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au)

**Suggested citation:** The State of Queensland (Queensland Family and Child Commission) *Rights, Voices, Stories project report: Identifying what matters to children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system* (2021)

## Copyright

© The State of Queensland (Queensland Family and Child Commission) 2021.

ISBN: 978-0-6451352-9-9

## Licence

This report is licensed by the State of Queensland (Queensland Family and Child Commission) under a Creative Commons Attribution (CCBY) 4.0 International licence. You are free to copy, communicate and adapt this report, as long as you attribute the work to the State of Queensland (Queensland Family and Child Commission). To view a copy of this licence visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>. Content from this document should be attributed as: The State of Queensland (Queensland Family and Child Commission) *Rights, Voices, Stories project report: Identifying what matters to children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system* (2021)



# Foreword

*We, the Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) youth researchers, are excited to share the work we've been doing to identify what matters to children in out-of-home care and to work towards more positive outcomes for them.*

*Between the 11 of us, we have more than one hundred different placement experiences in foster care, kinship care, residential care, boarding school, supported independent living, self-placing and homelessness. Some of our experiences were positive, but most were negative.*

*While our experiences have been diverse, what we have in common is that we don't want others to go through the negative things we went through—it's as simple as that.*

*We want a different future for kids in care.*

*We want a future where there isn't such a vast difference in outcomes between kids in care and kids living at home with their parents. Where kids in care have the same opportunities as every other child in Queensland, and more kids have a positive experience in care.*

*We want a future where kids in care are heard when they speak up. Where they are believed, understood, and helped to solve problems and make their circumstances better.*

*If nothing changes, nothing changes.*

*Change will not happen unless we can pass the microphone and empower children and young people with a care experience to share their stories, experiences and hardships.*

*We are working on this project because we want to help kids in care say what needs to be said to the people who need to hear it. We want to hold people, and systems, to account for doing what needs to be done to make things better.*

*We want to lead real change. The Queensland child protection system can and must do better.*

**QFCC youth researchers**

*Aimee, Brittany, Caroline, Grace, James, Janice, Jesse, Lucas, Marie, Miriel and Terry*

The QFCC's role in oversight of the system is about more than just monitoring what systems report—it's about measuring what matters. Who better to determine what matters than the people who rely on the system to keep them safe and well?

When we think about children's right to participate in decisions that affect them, we are interested in decisions about their individual circumstances. But we also want to empower them to influence decisions at the system level and outcomes for other children and young people, so they can shape the system that has been built to promote their safety and wellbeing.

That's why it's so important that the youth researchers took the lead on this project. **They spoke. We listened. Now it's time to act.**



**Cheryl Vardon**  
Chief Executive and  
Principal Commissioner



**Natalie Lewis**  
Commissioner

# Executive summary

There is a tendency, when measuring the effectiveness of programs, to assess input (resources invested) and output (for example, how many services are provided and how many people access them). While this is important information, it doesn't measure the impact or outcomes of the services.

Recommendation 8 of *Keeping Queensland's children more than safe: Review of the foster care system*—required the system to provide a more outcomes-based account 'of the experiences and perspective of children and young people who rely on child protection services to stay safe and well'.<sup>1</sup>

The Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) is working with the Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs; the Office of the Public Guardian and the child protection sector to respond to this recommendation.

A team of 11 youth researchers with previous out-of-home care experience or understanding worked on the *Rights, Voices, Stories* project. This project aims to highlight where the rights of children are not being upheld. It will use their voices to tell the stories that are important to them, to advocate for system change.

This report describes the process used to identify what is important to children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system. The QFCC will monitor and report on these issues.

*Our rights matter* is the name of the framework developed by the QFCC's youth researchers. It identifies what matters to children and young people, including:

- **identity**—Children and young people know where they're from and why they are involved in the child protection system, and are helped to work out who they are.
- **stability**—Even though their living arrangements might change, children and young people have stability in other areas of their lives and relationships.

- **health and wellbeing**—Children and young people have their health and wellbeing needs taken seriously and addressed.
- **feeling safe and loved**—Children and young people feel safe, secure and loved as they grow.
- **equity and fairness**—Children and young people are treated like others in the family home, and are supported in developing into adulthood in the same ways their peers are.

Systems and individuals within those systems need to be held accountable for upholding the rights of children and young people they are involved with. They also need to be held accountable when needs are not met.

The QFCC, together with the youth researchers, will:

- start gathering data to monitor these issues
- recommend improvements to enhance the experiences of children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system
- follow up with relevant agencies about progress in implementing recommendations and any evidence of improvement.

The QFCC will also report annually on data collected for the project, including the status of the recommendations that will come from it.

# Contents

- Foreword.....1**
- Executive summary.....2**
- Contents.....3**
- 1. Introduction.....4**
  - Background.....4
  - Youth researchers.....5
  - Purpose of this report.....5
- 2. Workshop.....6**
  - Our approach.....6
  - Workshop overview.....6
  - Post-workshop activities.....9
- 3. What matters to children and young people..... 10**
  - Our rights matter.....12
    - Identity.....13
    - Stability.....14
    - Health and wellbeing.....15
    - Safe and loved.....16
    - Equity and fairness.....17
    - Accountability.....18
- 4. Next steps..... 19**
- References..... 20**

# 1. Introduction

## Background

In 2017, the report *Keeping Queensland's children more than safe: Review of the foster care system* (the foster care review) found there was not enough focus within the child protection system on outcomes that directly affect the children and young people who are involved with it.

... we must listen to the children themselves ...  
*We have to make sure they are heard.*<sup>2</sup>

The Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) is leading the response to Recommendation 8 of the foster care review, which is:

*The Queensland Family and Child Commission works with the [then known as] Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services; the Office of the Public Guardian; and the child protection sector to provide a more outcomes-based account of the experiences and perspective of children and young people who rely on child protection services to stay safe and well. This should be reflected in the annual report produced by the Queensland Family and Child Commission.*<sup>3</sup>

The Queensland Government regularly reports on key performance indicators of the National Standards<sup>4</sup> for out-of-home care, including, for example, the proportion of children and young people with a current case plan and/or a cultural support plan.<sup>5</sup>

However, this data is primarily numbers and proportions, and provides limited insight into the outcomes achieved by young people, how involved they are in the case or cultural planning, or their satisfaction with the process.

The Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs is planning to conduct a survey of children and young people living in out-of-home care in 2021, which may address this.<sup>6</sup>

The Office of the Public Guardian maintains a register of issues raised by children and young people living in visitable locations.<sup>7</sup> Common issues<sup>8</sup> relate to:

- placement, including the suitability of the placement to meet the child or young person's unique needs, and appropriate matching of the child or young person with a suitable foster carer (or residential care placement)
- contact arrangements between a child and their parents, siblings and other important people in the child's life
- case planning, including the currency and appropriateness of case plans and whether the views of the child or young person were considered in its development.

There is a lot of literature about the poorer outcomes and issues experienced by children in care compared to those of their peers who live with their families.<sup>9</sup>



*An approach that is more closely linked to the practical issues that matter to young people.*



When discussing this project with the QFCC's stakeholders, it was agreed that there is little benefit in repeating data collection processes that are already underway, or updating data that has shown little change over time. Instead, stakeholders wanted an approach that is more closely linked to the practical issues that matter to young people, such as being able to attend their school formal and obtain a driver's licence.

To ensure the response to Recommendation 8 focuses on issues of importance to children and young people, the QFCC began the *Rights, Voices, Stories* project, which aims to highlight where the rights of children are not being upheld. It will use their voices to tell the stories that are important to them, to advocate for system change.

The QFCC sought applications from young people aged between 18 and 25 years with previous out-of-home care experience or understanding to become youth researchers and lead this project. The first task of the youth researchers was to identify what matters to children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system.

## Youth researchers

Eleven young people from urban and regional areas across Queensland joined the QFCC as youth researchers. They included four males and seven females with diverse experiences in the child protection, youth justice, education, health, mental health and disability systems in Queensland.

The youth researchers participated in a three-day workshop, held in Brisbane from 16–18 March 2021. They also undertook training in research skills to support their involvement in the qualitative data collection activities that will occur in later phases of the project.

## Purpose of this report

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the initial phase of the *Rights, Voices, Stories* project. It has been prepared by the youth researchers and QFCC project team.<sup>10</sup> Use of the pronoun 'we' in this report refers to this group.

**Section 2** of this report describes the workshop activities, and **Section 3** describes the *Our rights matter* framework developed by the youth researchers in the workshop in more detail.

**Section 4** outlines the proposed next steps for *Rights, Voices, Stories*.

**The child protection and family support system works hard to protect children and young people and help them to thrive. This project is intended to help with that, to identify any gaps, and to make sure that the children and young people who know what it's like to be in out-of-home care get the chance to say what works, what doesn't work, and what needs to change.**

**They, more than anyone else in the system, know what matters.**

## 2. Workshop

### Our approach

The QFCC hosted a three-day workshop in its Brisbane offices.

We used a mix of facilitated whole-group discussions, individual reflection exercises and small group activities. The QFCC also arranged for a researcher from the University of Queensland to deliver research skills training.

As casual employees of the QFCC, the youth researchers were paid for three days of work.

Quiet rooms and support staff were available if anyone needed a break from the discussion, which had the potential to trigger memories and cause emotional distress.

### Workshop overview

Each day of the workshop, a QFCC project team member opened and closed a 'yarning circle' by establishing a warm, welcoming, culturally appropriate space for the youth researchers to join together and connect with the land and waterways on which we were working.

This fostered a stronger connection within the group, as we discussed shared experiences and worked towards our common purpose of creating a better future for children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system.

The workshop involved:

- introductions and discussion about why we came together
- rule setting
- analysis of other outcomes frameworks for out-of-home care
- reflecting on our own values
- identifying what matters to children and young people in child protection (their needs and wants)
- grouping of needs and wants into higher-level issues
- telling senior officers from the QFCC and the Office of the Public Guardian about what was discussed in the workshop and the issues the youth researchers had come up with
- developing an understanding of research ethics issues, and developing skills for planning and running focus groups.





*‘If nothing changes,  
nothing changes.’*

## Getting started

We started the workshop by introducing ourselves, and talking about why the youth researchers were interested in working on the project. Representatives from the QFCC, the Office of the Public Guardian and the CREATE Foundation spoke about their excitement for the project on behalf of their organisations. We also talked about Recommendation 8 of the foster care review and our goals for the workshop.

## Setting boundaries

We came up with rules for the workshop, to set boundaries and hold each other accountable if these weren't met. Having rules was important in creating a cohesive, safe environment to work in (particularly for those who might have a negative reaction to conversations that reminded them of past traumas).

## Considering existing outcomes frameworks

We analysed existing outcomes frameworks from Queensland and elsewhere, and discussed how other jurisdictions and other departments in Queensland talk about outcomes for children and young people.

We discussed what we needed to do to respond to Recommendation 8, and whether elements of the frameworks we were looking at did enough to reflect the perspectives and experiences of children and young people. We talked about whether the outcomes were meaningful, whether they mattered to the youth researchers and whether they were relatable for children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system.

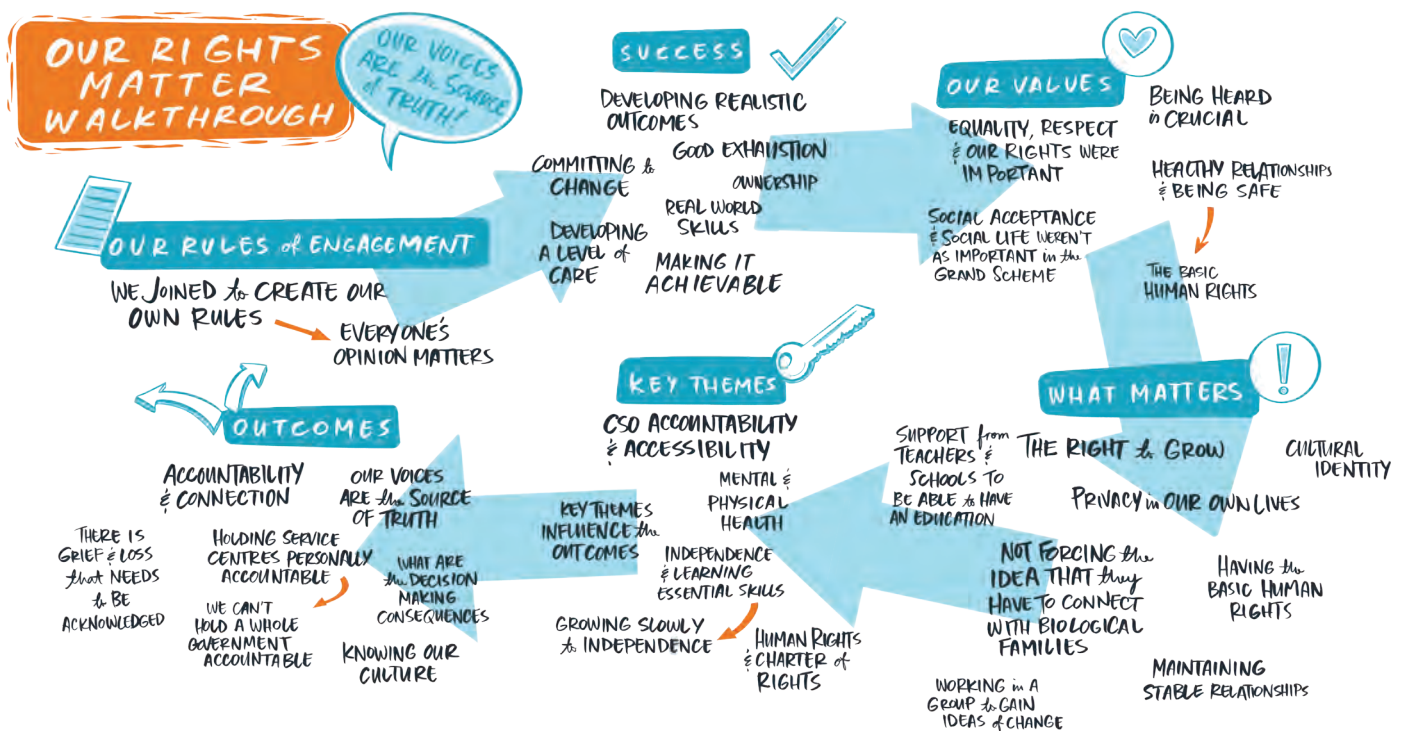
## Acknowledging our values

We reflected on our own values as a linking activity between looking at existing outcomes frameworks and developing our own. Having discussed what the system deems important (based on what is reported on, current practices and what is included in frameworks), in this activity we talked about our values and categorised them as very important, somewhat important, and not as important. We also talked about how values, and their importance, can change over time.

## Identifying the wants and needs of those in the system

The youth researchers thought about their wants and needs while in the Queensland child protection system to inform a discussion about what matters to all children and young people involved with the system. We had a 'silent conversation' activity where the youth researchers individually wrote their own wants and needs (from when they were in the system) on sticky notes. We also came up with examples of what other children and young people in the system want and need.

We then broke into small groups and sorted the sticky notes of wants and needs into categories to help us come up with higher-level themes or issues we should focus on in this project. We came back together to discuss the issues each group had come up with.



## Deciding on areas of focus

To work out what the focus areas should be for this project, the youth researchers placed seven stickers each on the issues they thought were most important. We then discussed the issues with the most stickers.

We talked about how some of the issues related to each other, and whether those we had come up with would be important to all children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system—not just those in the workshop room.

## Sharing our process

Senior officers from the QFCC and the Office of the Public Guardian joined the workshop for a ‘walk-through’ session. Posters with the outputs from each workshop activity were displayed around the room. Youth researchers, in pairs, chose which poster they would speak about as the guests walked around the room. The above is a graphic recording of this session.

## Research ethics issues

As a group, we discussed the importance of research ethics and the ethical issues likely to come up when (in later phases of the project) we conduct focus groups with children and young people with lived experience of the child protection system.

Topics we discussed included:

- our responsibility to do no harm and to minimise emotional stress and distress for participants by:
  - having clear processes so participants can make an informed decision about consent, and can choose to opt out of participating in research on topics that are sensitive for them
  - using suitable facilitators who can monitor for signs of participant distress
  - providing resources and information about where to access support if needed
- managing confidentiality and making focus group participants aware of the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of others in the group
- ensuring children (under 18) are able to make decisions about their participation without undue influence from others
- recognising potential conflicts of interest for facilitators as a result of other employment, associations and existing relationships with participants.

## Developing focus group facilitation skills

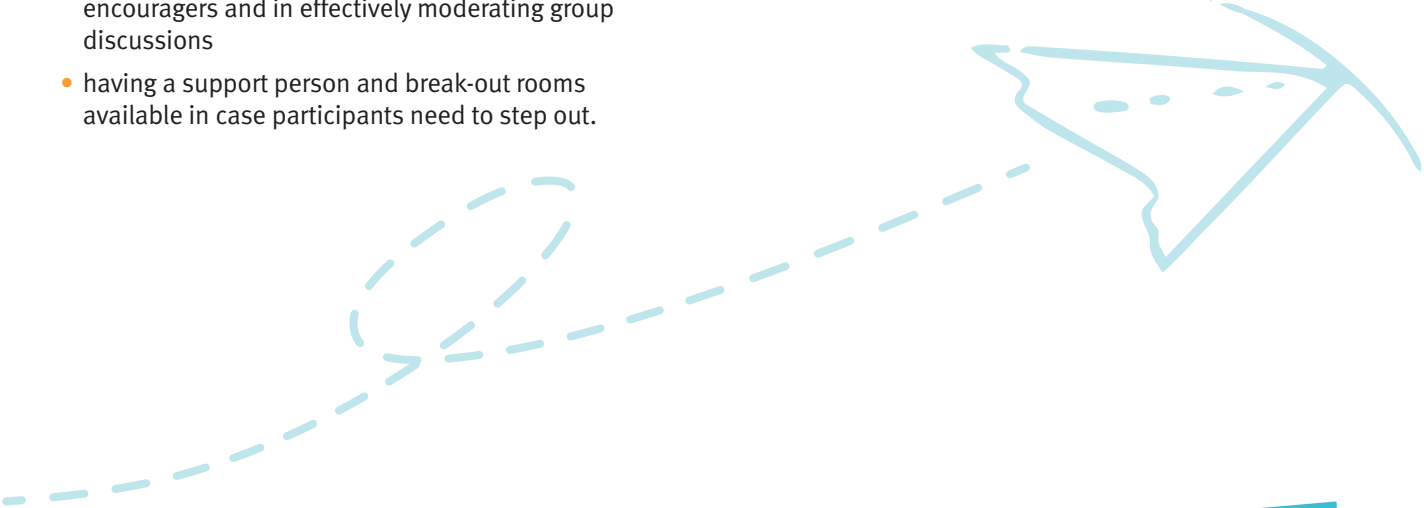
Dr Lisa Buckley from the University of Queensland led a session about focus group facilitation skills. We talked about how to plan and run a focus group, including:

- the importance of location—looking for a quiet space, with no distractions, where participants feel comfortable being honest
- having a list of topics to guide discussions (and to be consistent across groups)
- having two facilitators—preferably one with mental health training—to work together (one leads the discussion; the other scribes and monitors for issues)
- audio recording sessions to help in preparing transcripts (with participant consent) so participants can check for accuracy before the data is analysed
- the fact that the role of the facilitator is to collect (rather than share personal) information—facilitators should be skilled in active listening, in using minimal encouragers and in effectively moderating group discussions
- having a support person and break-out rooms available in case participants need to step out.

## Post-workshop activities

After the workshop, we went through all of the loose sticky notes and allocated them to the issues we had identified. We then did some thematic analysis to summarise our ideas into key examples under each issue. We also came up with descriptions of what each issue means.

This work was discussed in an online group session (allowing youth researchers from across the state to contribute) so we could finalise this process and have an infographic summarising our issues developed. This is shown in the next section.



*‘We want to lead real change. The Queensland child protection system can and must do better.’*

# 3. What matters to children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system

As the issues identified through *Rights, Voices, Stories* relate to rights, they are presented under the heading *Our rights matter*. Accountability for rights was also important, and underpins the framework summarised in this infographic.

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE MUST BE SUPPORTED to KNOW THEIR RIGHTS & HOW to FIGHT for THEM

## OUR RIGHTS MATTER

MY VOICE IS the SOURCE of TRUTH!

### IDENTITY

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE KNOW WHO they ARE, WHERE they ARE FROM & HAVE A POSITIVE SENSE of SELF IDENTITY & HAVE SELF-ESTEEM. THEIR INVOLVEMENT WITH the CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM DOES NOT DEFINE them.

EARLY ACCESS to BIRTH CERTIFICATE & OTHER IDENTIFYING INFORMATION

PHOTOS THROUGHOUT LIFE

HELPED to UNDERSTAND WHY they WERE INVOLVED WITH the CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

SUPPORTED to UNDERSTAND CULTURE, & the CHILD/YOUNG PERSON CHOOSES IF/HOW to BE INVOLVED

FULL ACCESS to FILES

RESPECTED AS AN INDIVIDUAL

SAFE to EXPLORE GENDER IDENTITY, SEXUAL ORIENTATION & SPIRITUALITY

### STABILITY

WHILE their LIVING ARRANGEMENTS MAY CHANGE, CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCE STABILITY in OTHER AREAS of their LIVES. THEY ARE SUPPORTED to MAINTAIN CONNECTIONS THAT ARE IMPORTANT to THEM.

PROVIDE COMFORT & SENSE of CONTROL of OWN SITUATION

STAY AT the SAME SCHOOL, EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION & CARE PROVIDER

CONSISTENCY of HEALTH CARE PROVIDER & SUPPORT SERVICES

CONSISTENCY of CASE MANAGEMENT

KEEP SENTIMENTAL POSSESSIONS

DECISIONS TAKE DEVELOPMENTAL AGE & INSTABILITY into ACCOUNT

FINDING & MAINTAINING A HOBBY or INTEREST to PROVIDE A SENSE of CONNECTION

SUPPORTED to MAINTAIN DESIRED SOCIAL, SIBLING & FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

CONSISTENT, TRUSTED PEOPLE AVAILABLE for ADVICE & SUPPORT

ADEQUATELY PREPARED for CHANGES with AN OPPORTUNITY to INFLUENCE DECISIONS

MAINTAINING A CONNECTION to RELIGIOUS or CULTURAL GROUPS

### HEALTH & WELLBEING

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE THEIR MENTAL, PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL & DEVELOPMENTAL HEALTH NEEDS, ASSESSED, TREATED/SUPPORTED & REVIEWED AT APPROPRIATE INTERVALS, INCLUDING AT their REQUEST.

COMPREHENSIVE HEALTH CHECKS AT APPROPRIATE INTERVALS WITH EARLY INTERVENTION

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES PROVIDED to ALL CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE UPON ENTERING CARE

SUPPORTED to HAVE FUN, PLAY, PARTICIPATE in SPORT, RECREATION & EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

APPROPRIATE TREATMENTS PROVIDED AT NO COST

GUIDED PATHWAYS to ACCESS SUPPORT SERVICES

CARE is TRAUMA INFORMED

SEXUAL HEALTH & PUBERTY INFORMATION EDUCATION & SUPPORT

RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIP INFORMATION, EDUCATION & SUPPORT

PERSONAL HYGIENE INFORMATION, EDUCATION & SUPPORT

### SAFE & LOVED

BEING SAFE & LOVED MEANS THAT A CHILD or YOUNG PERSON LIVES in AN ENVIRONMENT that CULTIVATES A FEELING of 'HOME', WHERE they FEEL SECURE, KNOW they ARE HEARD & UNDERSTOOD, ARE SUPPORTED & ARE ABLE to LEARN & GROW.

A SAFE PLACE that FEELS LIKE 'HOME'

FEEL & BE LOVED BY PEOPLE they CAN TRUST

BASIC NEEDS ARE MET (SHELTER, FOOD & CLOTHING)

LISTENED to & TAKEN SERIOUSLY

SUPPORTED & PROVIDED WITH RULES, BOUNDARIES & MORALS to SUPPORT HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

SAFE to BE A CHILD, ALLOWED to MAKE MISTAKES & LEARN from THEM

SUPPORTED to STRIVE to REACH GOALS & FULL POTENTIAL

UNDERSTANDING of RACIAL IDENTITY & STIGMA

### EQUITY & FAIRNESS

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE ARE ENTITLED to FAIR & EQUAL TREATMENT in the HOME, WITH the SAME RIGHTS, EXPECTATIONS & ENJOYMENT AS ALL (OTHER) CHILDREN WHILE SUPPORTED to PREPARE for LIFE AS AN INDEPENDENT INDIVIDUAL

TREATED the SAME WAY AS OTHER CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE in the HOUSEHOLD

HAVING REASONABLE PROCESS to SUPPORT PARTICIPATION in SCHOOL ACTIVITIES, CAMPS & OTHER EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

SUPPORT to ACCESS DRIVING LESSONS & OBTAIN A LICENCE

TIMELY & APPROPRIATE RESPONSES to REQUESTS for SUPPORT & TIMELY ACTIONING of THOSE REQUESTS

PROVIDED WITH the SAME RESOURCES & EQUIPMENT AS PEERS:

- PERSONAL HYGIENE ITEMS
- CLOTHING
- SCHOOL UNIFORM
- BOOKS
- SPORTING GEAR

NO LIMITS on ACCESS to TOOLS to SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE WHEN they LEAVE CARE

LIFE SKILLS INFORMATION, EDUCATION & SUPPORT

SYSTEMS & INDIVIDUALS WITHIN SYSTEMS ARE ACCOUNTABLE FOR UPHOLDING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE, & ACTING WHEN THERE ARE ISSUES

## ACCOUNTABILITY

THIS ISN'T LIMITED to CHILD SAFETY OFFICERS, AS IT INCLUDES MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS, COMMUNITY VISITORS, EDUCATORS, CARERS & SERVICE PROVIDERS.

# OUR RIGHTS MATTER

Article 12 of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* establishes the rights of children to be involved in decisions that affect them. It refers to this as *participation*, which is defined as an:

*... ongoing process of children’s expression and active involvement in decision-making at different levels in matters that concern them. It requires information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect and requires that full consideration of their views be given, taking into account the child’s age and maturity.*<sup>11</sup>

Being able to participate in decision making allows children and young people to have agency in their lives and to exercise their rights. Research<sup>12</sup> has identified that taking the views of children and young people in out-of-home care on board can lead to more successful interventions, skills development (including confidence and assertiveness) and outcomes. It can also mean children and young people are less vulnerable to poor treatment.

In 2018, the CREATE National Survey found that young people wanted to have a say about what was important to them, including daily activities, living arrangements and contact with family.<sup>13</sup> In fact, according to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, when acting in the best interests of the child,<sup>14</sup> their experience, concerns and preferences must be considered.<sup>15</sup> ‘Best interests’ can also mean that children and young people are assisted to represent themselves.

A consistent theme across the *Rights, Voices, Stories* workshop discussions was that children involved with the Queensland child protection system, like all children, have rights. They need to be helped to understand what their rights are and what they can do when their rights are not being met.

Regardless of their age or involvement with the child protection system, they should be listened to and their concerns taken seriously.

The remainder of this section outlines each element of the framework developed by the youth researchers by:

- describing the issue
- providing practical examples of what the desired outcomes look like
- summarising relevant research
- providing an illustrative quote (from the youth researchers) about the importance of the issue.

*‘My voice is the source of truth.’*

# IDENTITY

Identity means that children and young people know who they are, where they are from, have a positive sense of self-identity and have self-esteem. Their involvement with the child protection system does not define them.

Practical examples of what identity looks like for a child or young person involved with the Queensland child protection system include:

- having early access to their birth certificate and other identifying information
- having photos throughout life
- being helped to understand why they were involved with the child protection system
- being supported in understanding culture (the child/young person chooses if/how to be involved)
- having full access to files relating to them
- being respected as an individual
- being safe to explore gender identity, sexual orientation and spirituality.

Identity can positively and negatively influence a person's self-esteem and wellbeing. Children and young people in out-of-home care experience disruptions to their family unit. This can influence their understanding of 'family' and their sense of personal identity.<sup>16</sup>

*'In school, you're the foster kid.  
At home, you're the foster kid.  
Although I'm in the system,  
I am an individual and I have  
the right to my individuality.'*



# STABILITY

Stability means that even though their living arrangements might change, children and young people experience stability in other areas of their lives. They are supported in maintaining connections that are important to them.

Practical examples of what stability looks like to children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system include:

- being helped to maintain desired aspects of routine—to provide feelings of comfort and a sense of control over their own situation
- being able to stay at the same school/early childhood education and care provider
- having consistency of health care provider and other support services
- being assisted to maintain desired social, sibling and family relationships—including being placed with siblings
- having consistent, trusted people available for advice and support
- having consistency of case management, and quality handover when this isn't possible
- being adequately prepared for changes, with an opportunity to influence decisions
- being able to keep important/sentimental possessions
- ensuring that decisions resulting in changes take developmental age and the impact of additional instability into account
- being helped to find (and maintain) a hobby, interest or activity that can provide a sense of stability and connection over time
- being supported in maintaining desired involvement with religious or cultural groups and communities.

Stability is more than just the number of placements and the duration of time children and young people have been in care. It also relates to their feelings of connectedness and belonging.<sup>17</sup> They want to have a stable network of friends and positive relationships with carers, doctors, teachers and others. These relationships provide a 'sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity throughout childhood and beyond'.<sup>18</sup>

Having stable, consistent people in their lives helps children and young people to develop resilience, lower their stress, and reduce the likelihood of becoming homeless or involved with youth justice. It also provides positive health and employment outcomes.<sup>19</sup>



*'How am I meant to cope with what's going on around me and grow up to be a successful adult myself if I've never had stability?'*

## HEALTH & WELLBEING

**Health and wellbeing means children and young people have their mental, physical, emotional and developmental health needs assessed, treated/supported and reviewed at appropriate intervals, including at their request.**

Practical examples of what health and wellbeing look like to children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system include:

- having comprehensive health checks and assessments to identify the root cause of any issues (at appropriate intervals, including at the child's request), with early intervention
- having mental health services provided to all children and young people upon entering care
- having appropriate treatments (including medications and hypoallergenic products) provided at no cost
- being supported in having fun, playing, and participating in sport, recreation and extracurricular activities
- ensuring care is trauma informed<sup>20</sup>
- having guided pathways to access support services (for example, psychological counselling)
- being provided with sexual health and puberty information, education and support
- being provided with respectful relationship information, education and support
- being provided with personal hygiene information, education and support.

Health and wellbeing for children and young people in care are complex. If they enter the system with undiagnosed and untreated psychological, physical and developmental issues, these issues can impede their education and their ability to make lasting relationships and form stable attachments.<sup>21</sup>

When left undiagnosed or treated, these issues can affect their placement stability, their sense of safety, identity and overall health and wellbeing.<sup>22</sup>

When care is trauma-informed, it can support children and young people through safe care-giving and by understanding the adversity they have experienced.<sup>23</sup>

*'Don't just assume my problems are because I'm a kid in care and medicate me so my behaviour is more manageable—find out what's really going on and help me work it out.'*



## SAFE & LOVED

A child or young person who feels safe and loved lives in an environment that cultivates a feeling of 'home', where they feel secure, know they are heard and understood, are supported and are able to learn and grow.

Practical examples of what safe and loved looks like to children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system include:

- having a safe place that feels like 'home'
- feeling and being loved by a person/people they can trust
- having basic needs met (for example, shelter, food and clothing)
- being listened to and taken seriously
- feeling safe to be a child and being allowed to make mistakes and learn from them
- being supported and provided with rules, boundaries and morals to support healthy development
- being supported in striving to reach goals and full potential
- having racial identity and experiences of associated stigma understood.

Being safe and loved is a basic condition for healthy development. A lack of love can have a significant impact on self-esteem and emotional wellbeing.<sup>24</sup>

It also includes joining in the social practices of home life. Other feelings of being safe and loved include that someone is there to support them emotionally, encourage them and provide practical support.<sup>25</sup>



*'We don't want to feel like loving us is a chore —we want to be loved because we are worthy of being loved.'*

## EQUITY & FAIRNESS

Equity and fairness means that children and young people are entitled to fair and equal treatment in the home, with the same rights, expectations and enjoyment as all (other) children, while being assisted to prepare for life as independent individuals.

Practical examples of what equity and fairness look like to children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system include:

- being treated the same way as other children and young people in the household (for family-based placements)
- having a reasonable process to support participation in school activities, camps and other extra-curricular activities
- being helped to access driving lessons and obtain a licence
- receiving timely and appropriate responses to requests for support—and timely actioning of these requests
- being provided with the same resources and equipment as peers (for example, personal hygiene items, clothing, school uniform and books and sporting gear)
- having no limits on access to services to support young people when they leave care
- being provided with life skills information, education and support.

Children and young people enter the out-of-home care system through no fault of their own, and there is an expectation that the child protection system will act as a ‘better parent’. This means that, while the children and young people will have some challenges, they should be able to expect that they will be treated as equitably and fairly as those who are not involved with the child protection system.

Equity and fairness mean having the same opportunities as other children (not in care) to experience a sense of ‘normality’ and feelings of fairness.<sup>26</sup> This treatment extends to being taught the skills that occur naturally in ‘normal’ family life, assisting young people to become self-reliant and successfully make the transition into adulthood.<sup>27</sup>

*‘Kids living with their parents have help to learn how to survive in the outside world, and they learn what to do over years of watching and learning from their parents. We need those basic life skills too—a pamphlet or one-off referral doesn’t always cut it.’*



# ACCOUNTABILITY

**The *Our rights matter* framework is based on the simple fact that rights matter to children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system. But rights are meaningless unless there are consequences for failing to uphold them.**

Within the context of involvement with the child protection system, accountability means that everyone is doing a good job in the best interests of the child or young person. Assessing best interests must, at least in part, be informed by the child or young person—by listening to and taking account of their views.<sup>28</sup>

It is critical that systems and individuals within systems are accountable for upholding the rights of children and young people, and acting when there are issues that mean rights are not being met.

This is not limited to child safety officers and the government department responsible for child safety. Responsibility is shared across the community and with service providers and professionals who interact with children and young people, including medical professionals, community visitors, advocates, educators, carers and support service providers.<sup>29</sup>

Responsibilities include mandatory reporting obligations, responding when children and young people raise issues (including supporting them in making a complaint) and intervening when there are problems.

***‘It’s all very well to say I have rights,  
but what does that matter if no one listens  
when I say something is wrong?  
Who is accountable then?’***

## 4. Next steps

The next step for the *Rights, Voices, Stories* project is to share the *Our rights matter* framework developed by the QFCC's youth researchers with stakeholders and start discussing the issues and practical examples. We can then develop our understanding of relevant policies, practices and guidelines, identify potential data measures and discuss how stakeholders can support data collection.

We will discuss opportunities to enhance existing data collections (including surveys of children and young people in care) to gather data relevant to *Our rights matter*. We will also discuss how data collected for this project can support the work of stakeholders.

Where data exists, it will be drawn upon to measure<sup>30</sup> the issues that matter to children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system. This will be complemented by new qualitative data collected by the QFCC's youth researchers across Queensland.

The purpose of collecting qualitative data is to develop an understanding of what helps and hinders achievement of what matters. This will inform recommendations to improve policies and practices—and ultimately, the experiences of children and young people involved with the Queensland child protection system.

The QFCC will follow up with relevant agencies about progress in implementing the recommendations and any evidence of improvement. It will also report annually on data collected for the project, including the status of its recommendations.



*‘We want a different future  
for kids in care.’*

# References

- 1 *Keeping Queensland's children more than safe: Review of the foster care system*, [https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/final\\_report\\_FC\\_review.pdf](https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_FC_review.pdf)
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 The National Standards are an initiative of all governments—the Australian Government and state and territory governments—and are one of 12 priority projects of the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020*. One of the overarching principles of the National Standards is that out-of-home care for children and young people is measured, monitored and reported in a transparent, efficient and consistent manner over time. The National Standards and their measures are described in Attachment A of: [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/pac\\_national\\_standard.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/pac_national_standard.pdf)
- 5 Measures 4.1 and 10.1 respectively of the National Standards for out-of-home care, [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/pac\\_national\\_standard.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/pac_national_standard.pdf)
- 6 An action of *Supporting Families, Changing Futures 2019–2023* is to 'Undertake a survey of children and young people in care to ensure their voices and views are heard and used in the design and delivery of services.' <https://www.cvjma.qld.gov.au/resources/campaign/supporting-families/supporting-families-changing-futures-2019-2023.pdf>. The former Commission for Children, Young People and the Child Guardian conducted regular surveys of children and young people living in out-of-home care and youth detention. It asked a variety of questions about their living situations and experiences with engaging with different parts of the system. The survey was last conducted in 2012.
- 7 Every child or young person living in the home of a foster or kinship carer, or residential care facility, youth detention centre, disability service or mental health facility, is entitled to be visited by an advocate or visitor on behalf of the Office of the Public Guardian.
- 8 *Office of the Public Guardian 2019–20 Annual Report*, [https://www.publicguardian.qld.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/674768/opg-annual-report-2019-20-final-online.pdf](https://www.publicguardian.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/674768/opg-annual-report-2019-20-final-online.pdf)
- 9 *KPMG Final Report—National Standards for Out of Home Care*, <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/publications-articles/kpmg-final-report-national-standards-for-out-of-home-care-2010?HTML#32>
- 10 A Manager, Principal Advisor and Senior Advisor from the QFCC's oversight program were involved in this project.
- 11 *Every Child's Right to be Heard*, [https://www.unicef.org/files/Every\\_Childs\\_Right\\_to\\_be\\_Heard.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/files/Every_Childs_Right_to_be_Heard.pdf)
- 12 McLeod, A (2007), Whose agenda? Issues of power and relationship when listening to looked-after young people. *Child & Family Social Work*, 12, pp. 278–286.
- 13 *Out-of-home care in Australia: Children and young people's views after five years of national standards*, <https://create.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CREATE-OOHC-In-Care-2018-Report.pdf>
- 14 As required by s. 5A of the *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld), <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-1999-010>
- 15 *Every Child's Right to be Heard*, [https://www.unicef.org/files/Every\\_Childs\\_Right\\_to\\_be\\_Heard.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/files/Every_Childs_Right_to_be_Heard.pdf)
- 16 Department of Families (2003), *Stopping the drift: Improving the lives of Queensland's children and young people in long-term care*. Discussion paper.
- 17 *Outcomes for permanence and stability for children in long-term care*, [http://www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/media/unescochildandfamilyresearchcentre/documentspdf/2017\\_Outcomes-for-Permanence-and-Stability-for-Children-in-Long-term-Care\\_2017\\_Digital.pdf](http://www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/media/unescochildandfamilyresearchcentre/documentspdf/2017_Outcomes-for-Permanence-and-Stability-for-Children-in-Long-term-Care_2017_Digital.pdf)
- 18 MacDonald (2016) as cited in Devaney, C, McGregor, C & Moran, L (2019), 'Outcomes for permanence and stability for children in care in Ireland: Implications for practice', *British Journal of Social Work*, 49, pp. 633–65.
- 19 *Promoting Protective Factors for Children and Youth in Foster Care: A Guide for Practitioners*, [https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/guide\\_fostercare.pdf](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/guide_fostercare.pdf).
- 20 Trauma-informed care and practice is based on understanding and knowledge of how trauma adversely affects child development and people's lives. It promotes physical, emotional and cultural safety.
- 21 Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania (2019), *Monitoring Report No. 1 The Tasmanian Out-of-Home Care System and "Being Healthy"*.
- 22 Ford, T, & Vostanis, P, Meltzer, H, & Goodman, R (2007), 'Psychiatric disorder among British children looked after by local authorities: Comparison with children living in private households', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 190, pp. 319–325. Doi:10.1192/bjp.bp.106.025023.
- 23 McLean, S (2016), *The effect of trauma on the brain development of children. Evidence-based principles for supporting the recovery of children in care*, <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/sites/default/files/publication-documents/cfca-practice-brain-development-v6-040618.pdf>
- 24 Dickson, K, Sutcliffe, K, & Gough, D (2009), *What outcomes matter to Looked After children and young people and their families and carers? A systematic review of their experiences, views and preferences*, Social Science Research Institute, Institute of Education, University of London.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Biehal, N (2012), 'A Sense of Belonging: Meanings of Family and Home in Long-Term Foster Care', *British Journal of Social Work*, 44, pp. 955–971. DOI: 10.1093/bjsw/bcs177
- 27 *KPMG Final Report—National Standards for Out of Home Care*, <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/publications-articles/kpmg-final-report-national-standards-for-out-of-home-care-2010?HTML#32>
- 28 *Every Child's Right to be Heard*, [https://www.unicef.org/files/Every\\_Childs\\_Right\\_to\\_be\\_Heard.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/files/Every_Childs_Right_to_be_Heard.pdf)
- 29 *KPMG Final Report—National Standards for Out of Home Care*, <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/publications-articles/kpmg-final-report-national-standards-for-out-of-home-care-2010?HTML#32>
- 30 We will be seeking to both describe and quantify the issues experienced by children and young people in the Queensland child protection system.



